BARBARA HALE: A DOCTOR'S DAUGHTER

BY LILIAN GARIS

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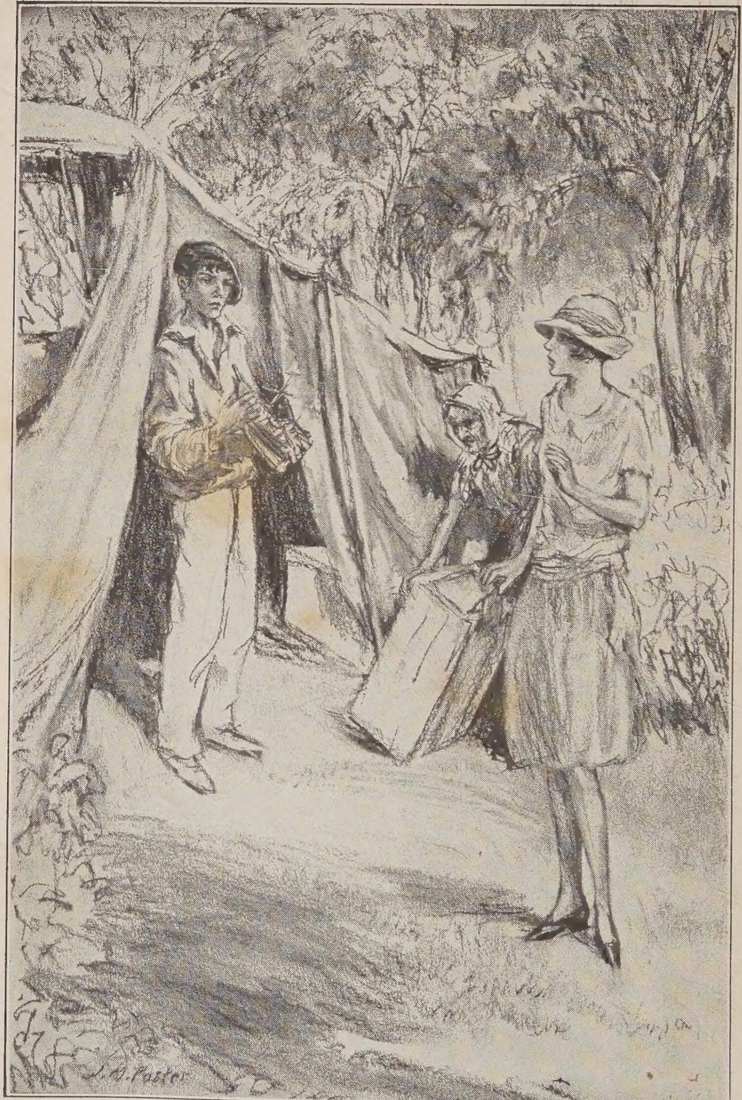

" OH," GASPED BABS, " I DIDN'T KNOW —— "

Barbara Hale: A Doctor's Daughter. *Frontispiece—(Page 266)*

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A DOCTOR'S DAUGHTER

By

LILIAN GARIS

Author of

"BARBARA HALE AND COZETTE," "CONNIE LORING'S AMBITION," "JOAN: JUST GIRL," "GLORIA: A GIRL AND HER DAD," "GLORIA AT BOARDING SCHOOL," ETC.

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BARBARA HALE: A DOCTOR'S DAUGHTER
BARBARA HALE AND COZETTE

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BARBARA HALE: A DOCTOR'S DAUGHTER

CHAPTER I

SEA SANDS AND SOMERSAULTS

THEY dug their heels deeper into the white sand. As they were bare heels there seemed to be nothing else to do with them.

"I think it's simply a wonderful idea," Louise St. Clair reiterated, "only, I can't just see how you are going to feed us all for three whole days, Cara."

"Feed you! Dear child, that's the easiest part of it. Lottie adores feeding the hungry. But what bothers me is what I can do to keep you all happy." Cara Burke, who had never been called Caroline, took her heels out of the sand and stuck them up in the sunshine. She was so strictly modern and so much up to date that her own personal schedule must have been eons ahead of the time marked on the pretty calendars sent around by M. Helmer, the butcher.

"A house party is bound to make us all so happy we'll never want to go home, Cara," declared Esther Deane, she with a new boyish bob hair-cut that she couldn't keep her hands off. "I'd like to fetch my trunk, if we only lived a few blocks farther away."

"Fetch it; there're bushels of room out in the garage," responded Cara mischievously. "But you know, children, my list isn't filled yet. I have just got to have Barbara Hale."

"Barbara Hale!" Both girls exclaimed in perfect unison.

"Yes." Cara squatted on her bare feet now and showed signs of conflict. "I want her. I like her. She's so different, she's sure to be good fun."

"Good fun!" Esther almost sneered. "About as funny as a Latin exam, I'd guess. She looks different, and she is different. But at a house party! Cara, you're crazy."

"So they say," agreed Cara dryly. "But I'm going to ask her, just the same."

"She'll never leave that dad of hers," declared Louise. "You know he's some kind of a queer doctor and they say she's going to be a nurse."

"He's a bacteriologist," Esther informed her friends, with that very definite tone always peculiarly Esther's when she knew anything so worth while as that.

"Well," drawled Cara, "Dudley says she's a peach, and while he's not to come to the party he might just look in and——"

"And poor us! We may have to rival a peach," moaned Louise. "I do wish you wouldn't, Cara," she pleaded again. "Honestly, I am afraid of anything so high and mighty as Barbara Hale."

"Why should she be so high and mighty?" challenged Cara. "She's no older than we are."

"She's past fifteen, I should think," guessed Esther.

"I suppose she is, for she was in first year high last summer when we came back to Sea Cosset; I remember that," agreed Cara quite amicably. Cara wasn't merely pretty, she was lively always, and her brown eyes managed her entire face so capably one never noticed the little irregularity of her other features. Every one said Cara Burke was "all eyes" and her eyes were lovely.

"It's queer how every one thinks Barbara is so wonderful," Esther was determined to find fault. "She just acts like an old lady, it seems to me."

"Esther Phester! How dare you!" mocked Cara. "Now, you're being jealous. You see, it's like this. There are lots of wise old ladies but a wise young lady is different."

"You talk rather wise yourself and you're not so old," retorted Louise.

"I am old. I love to be. Children are a pest, so please don't act so childish, girls," Cara in turn retorted. "You're both perfectly lovely when you talk sensibly, so let's decide how we are going to get the wily Barbara to our house party. Any suggestions?"

Persons just sauntering along for a rather late swim attracted their attention, and for the time being Barbara Hale was apparently forgotten. New and odd bathing suits were ever interesting to the girls, and those at the moment being displayed were certainly novel if not actually new.

"How can red-headed girls wear that howling yellow?" commented Louise. "She looks like a gasoline sign." Her own hair favored the red tints, what there was of it.

"That tango is worse," declared Esther. "They must be strangers."

"Just wandered down from the other beach, I guess," Cara said indifferently. She was never as much interested in strangers as were her two friends.

Settling down again to finish their sunning, for they had had their swim some time earlier, the subject of Barbara Hale was once more introduced.

"I don't see that you girls are helping me out very much with my guest list," Cara reminded them. "You know I am bound to have Barbara. Now, I'll offer a prize for the best suggestion. How shall I invite her?"

"Why not 'hail' her down here?" Louise suggested.

"Now, Louie; that's being too smart; to pun on Barbara's name," answered Cara. "The fact is, or isn't it? Does she come down here, ever?"

"It isn't, she doesn't. You don't catch that smart girl wasting her time on the beach." As Esther said this she seemed to enjoy the saying of it.

"I'd like to know, Essie," drawled Cara, using the little name Esther detested, "what have *you* against Barbara Hale?"

"I!" How much she made of the smallest word! As if the idea were preposterous.

"Yes, you. Every time I mention Barbara you just seethe up." Cara tossed up a shower of sand that slipped through her fingers in little streams—what was left of the shower did that. If, as she said, Esther did dislike Barbara, surely she, Cara, must have liked her, decidedly.

Esther didn't try to answer the charge. They were, all three of them, just at that stage of young girlhood that might be called the mimic stage. They said smart things, or tried to say them, because older girls acted that way. True, the older girls never deigned to associate with Cara, and her "set." Just "kids" they were still being inelegantly styled. But girls in second year high do feel rather important, and at this particular new summer season the three girls on the beach at Sea Cosset were not one whit less important—in their own way—than Elinor Towle, Katherine Barrett and Melinde Trainor, all over twenty, and now sitting on the same cozy little beach nearer the water. Merely degrees of difference separated them, but there seemed nothing essentially different between the two groups.

And to make the comparison still closer, here was Cara planning to give a house party.

"I don't care what any one says," Louise spoke up rather like a small girl again, "it's a perfectly darling idea. Even if we all do live around here; what difference would a train ride make in a house party?"

"None; not a speck," confirmed Esther, both the girls bracing Cara up in her resolve to give the party and worrying secretly lest she back out.

"Except," chimed in Cara, "that when they come a distance they have to stay. If you girls get bored to death you could even sneak home in your nighties," she wound up, turning a very good hand-spring to prove why she was such a fine basketball player.

"No danger of *us* sneaking home, Cara," declared Louise. "I'm just crazy about the idea. And I know there are a lot of girls jealous because you didn't ask them," she flattered the prospective hostess.

"Really!" Cara reversed the hand-spring and threw up a veritable desert sandstorm with the turn. "The only reason I have asked just five," she panted, settling again, "is because mother would only let me have three rooms."

"Just imagine having *three* rooms for company!" gasped Esther. "I'm lucky to get an extra cot in my own room and the attic privilege while we're down here. But *you* can invite a whole tribe to stay days with you."

"Now girls!" spoke Cara, sighing a little as if in despair at their attitude, "don't get the idea that a big house and a flock of servants make a lot of fun. They don't. We had better times when we camped in a lovely wide-open bungalow out on the bluff, where you didn't dare leave the front door open without danger of blowing out at the back door. Oh me, oh my!" she sighed. "Them was the days! When I ate molasses cookies without fear of fatness. But we are not getting at the important point of asking Barbara. Haven't you anything else to propose? It will be time to dress before we decide a single thing."

"Why not call on her? She's not anything to be afraid of, is she?" This was Esther, of course.

"No." Cara paused, thoughtfully. "But she is, I know, a busy girl, and one doesn't want to 'bust' in on a highbrow just as she's in the act of discovering some scientific—oh, whatever it is they discover, you know," she floundered. "Besides, it would look so important if I called. As if my party was really going to be a party instead of a row. I'm sure it will end in a row, you know," Cara was prettiest when she laughed.

"Cara Burke! You just want to make believe it isn't going to be wonderful when you know very well it is," pouted Louise. "But if you want Barbara Hale so badly, I'll manage somehow to see her, and I'll ask her if you want me to."

"Want you to! I'd *love* you to. I just want Barbara, well, for more than one reason, but *one* is because Dud declares she wouldn't bother with such silly little things as he claims we are. I want to show him."

"Oh, that's it." Esther's lip curled and she was now acting very grown up indeed.

"Does Dud know Barbara?" Louise wanted to know.

"That's just it. She's sort of, what he calls, elusive. They just know her enough to be curious about her."

"I don't think she's so wonderfully pretty," commented Esther again. "And I'm certain sure she's not rich!"

"Esther Phester!" cried out Cara in mock despair. "There you go. Rich! That isn't what counts at all, not with boys like Dud, anyway. *They* like girls who keep them guessing."

"Oh, Barbara Hale can do that well enough," scoffed Esther. "Isn't she keeping us guessing?"

"Just because she keeps to herself," retorted Cara. "Now, that's just why I'm so crazy to know her. There must be a reason for her, oh, you know," again stumbled Cara, who wanted to say there must have been a reason for Barbara's aloofness, or was it reticence?

"Since you are so keen about it Cara, I'll do my best," offered Louise. "You know, her father is a sort of doctor and has some of the awfully rich folks on his list."

"Rich!" moaned Cara. She seemed to loathe the word. They were starting off towards the boardwalk along which a slim line of girls and boys were already winding their way towards the road. It was almost lunch time.

Just as the girls came to within a few feet of the roadway a small car drew up and from it sprang two persons.

"Look!" gasped Louise. "There she is now!"

"Is that—Barbara!" exclaimed Cara in an undertone, for the two in bathing suits—a young girl and a young man—were racing along through the sands quite close to them.

"Yes." answered Esther and Louise in one voice.

"Isn't she stunning in a bathing suit?" continued the entranced Cara. "She must be dandy at athletics." The two figures under scrutiny were now far enough away to be out of possible reach of the girls' voices. Barbara Hale was wearing the regulation blue bathing suit with white stripes around the long Jersey and a loose sash flew along after her as she ran towards the ocean. She was trying to adjust her rubber cap as she went, and was just now crowding into it a closely bobbed head, chestnut in color, that beautiful brown that glows and glistens and lights up so wonderfully in the sunshine. Barbara was as slender and straight as an Indian. Her limbs were innocent of stockings or socks, for girls under sixteen were not now trying to be prim at Sea Cosset, that is, girls like Barbara.

"But who can the good-looking boy be?" Louise wondered. "Isn't he just—just——"

"Not lovely," warned Cara. "Please don't call him anything so silly as that. He's fine looking, just great. Whew! Look at those two strike out!"

Dots on the waves were all that could now be seen of the two who were ducking in and out of the crest, but the girls still watched as if fascinated.

"Better ask him to the party, Cara," suggested Esther. "I'll bet all the girls would want to stay if he were around."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," proposed the wily Cara. "I'll tell Dudley I'll have Barbara to the party if he manages to fetch along the good-looking boy. I've just decided to give a dance. Why shouldn't we have a dance?" she asked simply, with one of those sudden strokes of social genius she was especially noted for.

"A dance!" echoed Louise, in ecstasy. She did clasp her hands but caught herself just in time to save that foolish expression Cara was sure to call saintly. Louise was very apt to clasp her hands, throw one of those heavenly looks out of her gray eyes, and altogether affect quite a pose when anything suddenly pleased her.

"Yes, a dance," Cara repeated. "We are grown up enough for that, although we couldn't, of course, ask the boys to the house party. They *could* come in to the dance."

"Just look at Barbara Hale now," suggested Esther. The figures were shaking themselves out of the waves, and as the girls watched they saw Barbara put her two hands on a big post that supported the ropes, and vault over as easily as did her companion following her. "Don't you suppose he's her cousin?" Esther asked, innocently.

"Not necessarily," replied Cara. "But if we don't make a break for lunch——" They made the break.

CHAPTER II

WHEN THE DAY ARRIVED

BETWEEN that day at the beach and the day set for the first session to the house party, Cara all but backed out several times. It was rather absurd, to ask five girls to week-end at her lovely big home, the Billows, to bring clothes enough for three days and to stay for almost that length of time, when they all lived near enough to run home if their mothers should call them—on the telephone.

But from the time that Cara mentioned the brilliant idea to Louise and Esther, she was not allowed to change her mind. There is not a great deal of excitement for girls of their ages at little sea-coast towns, and the prospects of a house party were far too precious to relinquish.

Mrs. Burke, Cara's mother was rather pleased that her athletic daughter thought of anything so socially refining, for, as a rule, Cara cared very little for the amenities. She liked, very much better, to row their boat on the lake that always seemed to envy the wild little wavelets that flew about the ocean's edge, or she might stay on the golf links all day with her dad, who believed in golf for girls as well as for boys, and there was only Dudley at Burke's to share honors with his sister Cara.

So now that the day of the party was actually at hand, Cara felt like "laughing her head off," as she described her unusual emotions.

"If it wasn't that I just made this chance to get acquainted with Barbara Hale, Moma," (she always called her mother Moma because it means soft, in Celtic,) "I would be apt to think myself silly. But it's worth while to meet Barbara."

"Why is she so difficult and desirable?" asked Mrs. Burke, who might be Moma or "soft" to her daughter, but as a woman seemed quite the opposite. She was capable of formality, fine, dignified yet lovely with just that charm that all mothers should possess.

"Well," replied Cara to her question, as she settled a final bunch of snap-dragons on the long davenport table in the living-room, "to tell you the truth, Moma, she's a bit mysterious."

"A girl—mysterious; how?"

"Oh, in a lot of ways. I couldn't just tell you, darling, but they're plenty. Wait until you meet her," she promised archly. "I'm sure you will call her perfect; I believe all the grown-ups do. She's said to be so sensible."

"Not too sensible, I hope," qualified Mrs. Burke, who liked girls to be girls and not Minervas.

"No. My own idea is that the sensible stuff is just a pose to keep the girls away.) She's not cranky, I know that. I met her at the Community Club last week," continued Cara, who was now donning her white sport coat, preparing for a race in town. "At any rate, Moma, I'm sure it will do me a lot of good to know her," she just nipped a make-believe kiss on her mother's cheek. "She might inspire me with a little sense."

"Oh, you're not so bad, my dear," replied the proud mother, surveying Cara affectionately. "But I am really anxious to meet the paragon."

A half-hour later Cara was being surrounded at the post office; the girls who were shortly to be her guests formed the circle. She had just told them that Barbara was coming.

"How ever did you get her?" demanded Louise.

"As easy as easy," teased Cara. "All I did was just give the operator the number and Barbara answered." Cara was plainly proud of the conquest.

"And she said she'd come? Right off?" asked Esther in uncovered surprise.

"Said she would *love* to, not what you might call exactly 'right off' but after her father had urged her to. He calls her Babs and they seem to be great chums," Cara finished, trying to break away from the party and reach her mailbox.

"Oh, they are," agreed Louise. "That's just what makes her so different. She's always chumming with her father. Isn't that queer?"

"Not so very," said Cara dryly. "Dad and I are pretty good chums. But I've got to rush or I won't be at the front door to greet you when you arrive," and she did break away this time.

"Cara!" called Lida Bent, a new girl in Sea Cosset, "shall we really bring our suit-cases?"

"Just as you like," answered Cara, mischievously stepping back to make her remarks safe for Lida's ears only. "If you want to carry your pajamas on your arm *I* have no objection. There really isn't any obligation to carry suit-cases."

"Now Cara," blushed little Lida who was a dainty blonde and blushed prettily, "you know I don't mean that."

"Well, Lida, you may bring a steamer trunk if you like," joked Cara, "only be sure to come. That's the big idea," and Cara Burke, the heroine of the day with a house party only a few hours off, clutched her bundle of morning mail as she escaped from her admiring friends.

Cara was always such a lark, they each and all were sure to be thinking, and to give this affair simply sealed that opinion.

Louise, Esther, and Lida sauntered off with their own post office material, but this today seemed less interesting than usual.

"I didn't know whether to fetch my corduroy or silk robe," said Louise. "If we go romping around I suppose the silk——"

"Will be too thin," Esther finished laughingly. "You're lucky, Louie, to have two down with you. Mother just won't allow any duplicates in my clothes. She hates baggage so."

"A robe?" repeated Lida. "Why, I hadn't thought of that. Of course we must fetch robes," she repeated showing alarm that the idea had almost escaped her.

"That's mostly what a house party is for," Louise continued. "To show off our pretty things. Although," she hurried to atone for the possible boast, "I don't pretend to have *pretty* things, they're just—just useful of course," she ended trying hard to be sensible.

"There's Ruth!" exclaimed Esther, as a girl with a big box turned a corner and walked towards them. "I'll bet *she's* got a new robe. Look at that box."

" 'Low girls!" called out Ruth Harrison, a tall girl who walked with a swinging stride. "I had to go shopping the last minute, and I'm dead. Whew! It's hot carrying bundles," and she took off her hat to prove it.

"A new robe? We were just talking about robes," said Esther. "It's hard to know whether we ought to fetch bungalow aprons or—or ulsters. Cara may have some kind of a midnight parade on, she's such a joker."

"Robe!" repeated Ruth. "Say, I never thought of a robe. This is a new party dress; Cara told me about the dance only yesterday. But a robe!" Ruth look dismayed. Her frank, eager face was suddenly changed into a question mark. What should she do about a new robe? She had one, of course, but probably not one worthy of Cara's party.

"Don't bother," suggested Louise, noticing Ruth's perplexity, "you can just duck in and out——"

"Ye-ah! While you all parade. I can see that. But do you mean to tell me I've got to wear my Indian blanket? It's one I had at camp and I love it——"

"Why don't you? That would be fun," spoke up Louise, brightly.

"The very thing and I'll bring—— But never mind the details," Ruth suddenly drew up, getting a better grip on her box. "I'll be there with my blanket. I've got to rush. I want an ocean bath first."

"Isn't she funny?" remarked Lida, as Ruth dashed off.

"She'd love a thing forever, even an Indian blanket," said Louise rather complimentary to Ruth.

"And an ocean bath today! Just as if she couldn't have that every day," murmured Esther as they were again on their way.

"I hope she didn't get a rose-colored dress, that's my color," went on Louise. "And if two of us were dressed alike at that small party we'd look like twins or something," she finished tittering happily at the idea.

"Ruth is so much, so sort of—a lot," Esther ventured, "she's almost twins herself. But here's where we part. Be ready at three and we'll all go in our big car."

"In style," added Lida. "It's lovely you have a big car, Esther."

"And a good-natured mother," added Louise. "I suppose she gave up something, to drive for us this lovely afternoon."

"She was glad to give it up," confessed Esther, "for it's a meeting on the summer exhibit. I can't see why towns always have to do summer things that keep folks so busy."

"Because there are not enough folks to do things in winter," said little Lida quietly. "Mother's on a committee and she thinks it's going to be fine."

"I guess they've got all our mothers on," grumbled Louise. "But we always have to have something every summer. Well, good-bye for a while," as they reached the little dividing park, "and I'll be ready, Esther."

"Don't forget your robe," called out Esther jokingly, for their robes had suddenly become an all-important item in the house-party programme.

CHAPTER III

HER FATHER'S DAUGHTER

In a house that hid behind friendly old trees cuddled in trumpet vines and tender, little trailing things, Barbara Hale and her father, Dr. Winthrop Hale, lived. It was just off the road that stretched into the newly settled summer place called by the land developers Sea Cosset. A fanciful name indeed, and it's choice had caused much discussion, for as every one with access to a dictionary soon discovered, cosset means pet and is usually applied to a little lamb.

"Sea Lamb," scoffed the old sailors who brought their nets in from the ocean at the road's turn.

"Why didn't they call it 'the kid,' and be done with it," Thom Merrill wanted to know. Thom had sold all his land to the enterprising development company, and now he had nothing else to do but criticize their choice of name for the new colony.

"But you're all wrong," declared Mary-Louise Trainor, who was the "bookiest" woman in the county. "We choose the name because it literally means that the sea fondles, loves, yes if you like——" she flung this defiantly into Thom Merrill's red face—" the sea *pets* the land at this pretty little point, and Sea Cosset is a perfectly ideal name."

"Sure is," agreed Thom, chuckling so audibly that Mary-Louise turned away in evident disgust at that memorable meeting held three years ago last spring. Then Sea Cosset was cut away from the surrounding territory by its fancy name, a number of pretty bungalows, the land agents' promise to build more "of any design desired as fast as they would be applied for," not to mention all the other well-advertised improvements of a new summer place as compared with its well-seasoned, comfortable old town of Landing.

Strange that all of this would have anything to do with Cara Burke's house party. But it had, for Barbara Hale and her beloved "Dads," the doctor, were this very day admitting they should have sold their land, or some of it, to that company that developed Sea Cosset.

"Then, my dear Babs," said father, regretfully, "you might have afforded proper things for your party."

"But I don't need them, really, Dads; I've got lots of clothes," protested the daughter. "It's just that these different affairs require different things."

Which explanation meant not a thing, in the way of an explanation, for it plainly stated that Barbara Hale did not have things ready for a house party.

On the floor of her quaintly old-fashioned bedroom, Barbara was now packing her suit-case. And only the suit-case that lay there helplessly could have seen or understood the expression on her face, for the bag had more than once witnessed that same look as Barbara leaned over, putting things in and taking them out, anxiously.

"She's worried but she's brave," would have been the verdict could the leather case have spoken.

"But she's plucky and she'll never never give in to silly little clothes," the comb and brush might easily have confided to each other.

"And you don't know, Dads, what a perfectly stunning pair of pajamas I have," the girl leaning over the bag spoke up finally. "You know, dear old Mrs. Seaman sent them to me for Christmas; wasn't that lucky?"

"It was," replied the tall, thin man sullenly. "And if it hadn't been for dear old Mrs. Seaman," he was adding irony to every word, "I suppose you wouldn't have that perfectly stunning pair of slippers, either." More irony, more sarcasm, and teams of bitterness sharpened Dr. Hale's words. He was blaming himself, only, and was therefore free to be as cruel as he wished about it.

"Dads," coaxed Barbara, jumping up from her packing and confronting the ogre, "you're being mean." She was standing there before him in her big white bungalow apron—this was *her* idea of a practical bathrobe—and her eyes, always the deepest blue, were now so truly violet that their shadows were almost purple.

Certainly Barbara had a remarkable face—every feature matched up so perfectly—but the two most striking were her pallor, for one of her type, which she left untinted; and the deep violet of her eyes. She looked foreign or rather classic, with a firmness about her expression hardly fair to her youth. Her nose was very straight with that sculptured curve at her nostrils that made one think of a Greek statue—or a young colt, depending entirely upon Barbara's mood.

Just now she was being the colt, and Dr. Hale, her indulgent father, was well aware of that mood.

"We should have sold off some of our land, Babs," he repeated, coming back to her door and intoning the words like a verdict for some one doomed.

"We should not, Dads," she contradicted. "Just because I haven't a few brand new rags for a silly little party, you stand there bewailing our misery." Her words were serious enough but her tone was bantering. Barbara was determined to cheer up the gloomy man before her.

"Well, all right," he conceded, tapping his fingers impatiently on her door jamb and thereby drawing one's attention to its shabby paint. "But I'm glad you're going. Do you good," he pronounced, again in that judicial tone.

"Maybe," scoffed Barbara. "But I wouldn't have gone a single step if it hadn't been for that Cara Burke." Barbara ignored her packing completely now. "She's the nicest girl, Dads, really a thoroughbred. I just couldn't refuse her." The inference was plainly that she preferred to have refused even Cara.

"And why should you refuse?" demanded Dr. Hale. "Look here, Babs," he spoke a little sharply. "Do you know this won't do? I won't have folks talking about you as if I—as if I were depriving you of—of everything."

"Dadykins!" Barbara burst out, and all the pallor of her face was now dyed with an angry flush. "Who has said that? Whose business is it what we do or how we live? Just because I *want* to keep to myself more than other girls do, they think I'm being deprived of—of what?" she ended bitterly, and it was easy to see now that she was very much her father's daughter.

"There now, don't get excited," placated the doctor. "I'm sure *no* one was talking about us, dear. Do hurry your packing," he urged anxiously. "Dora has lunch ready and we must not get *her* wrought up," he ended wearily. "Dora's our stand-by," he pointed out emphatically.

"But it does make me so mad, Dad," Barbara echoed. "To have folks always slurring——"

"But they were *not*, dear." He raised his voice irritably. "I merely guessed that they might."

Still in her bungalow apron and with her arms bare, Barbara answered Dora's call to lunch. She was excited. Not on account of her father's words, which really had amounted to nothing unusual, but because she had to go to that party. And she hadn't the right things to wear.

The little meal was not, apparently, being much appreciated, for both Barbara and her father were entirely preoccupied, as Dora passed from one to the other the slighted food.

Suddenly the jangling telephone startled them.

"I'll go," offered Barbara. "Take your tea, Dads."

It was Cara Burke calling.

"Yes, yes," Barbara answered. "That's awfully good of you, Cara, but I am honestly on the point of sending my very late regrets. I really should not have accepted."

"Why Barbara!" almost shrieked Cara at the other end of the wire but the telephone voice was of course, pouring into Barbara's ear, "I just couldn't have the party without you. You've got to come. Don't mind about the little dance," went on distracted Cara. "I shouldn't have told you only I thought you would want to know."

"I do, Cara. And it's lovely of you to call me up." Barbara hesitated. Cara had just called her to say there would be a little dance and she might want to fetch something different for it. And that had added to Barbara's misery, for what had she different to take?

Long and ardent pleas and protestations were coming over the wire, for Cara had counted much upon the presence of Barbara at her party, but now, at the last moment, the much-desired one was hesitating.

There was no questioning the sincerity of Cara Burke. Unspoiled by all her advantages, she was so worth-while a girl that Barbara found it very difficult indeed to ignore her advances.

"It's so good of you," Barbara repeated. But you see, I——" she paused, and instantly Cara filled the gap.

"You know, my brother Dudley thinks you and your friend Glenn are just about right," Cara chuckled, "and he promised to get Glenn to come to our little dance if *I* could get you to come to the party."

"Really!" laughed Barbara. "Glenn's an awful stick—I mean he's what we call a real stude, student you know," Barbara explained. "But is he going?"

"Dud says he is, and that's why you really couldn't disappoint me; now could you, Barbara?"

"After all that? It would be ungrateful I know, Cara. But clothes—"

"I understand perfectly, Babs," Cara was saying, using the endearing name with telling effect. "You don't pay much attention to clothes. Couldn't I lend you a little dress? You are just about my size and I've so many useless frocks that mother loves to buy. Wouldn't you wear one just out of charity? It would really be a blessing to air the stuff."

What could Barbara say to such an impulsive, generous girl? Well, that was just what she did say, and when she finally left the phone and returned to the table, her face had lost its look of perplexity.

"Well, Dads," she exclaimed, beaming so merrily that her dark eyes threatened to ignite, "I guess I'm in for it now. Cara is bound to play me up, although why she's so keen I can't see."

"I can," replied her father grimly. "And look here, Barbara Hale," he continued, using her name to emphasize his seriousness, "I'm glad you're going. It's highly important that you should go. It's all very well to be a high-brow ——"

"High-brow! Me, a high-brow?"

"Exactly. What do you think a good student ever becomes if not intelligent?"

"But I want to know—just certain things——"

"Exactly again. That's just how one becomes a high-brow. If you had scattered interests, Babs dear, it would be different. But when one concentrates one achieves."

"Daddy, don't you want me to study?" Barbara's voice was pleading, her eyes misty.

"Yes, daughter, of course I do," replied the father, himself softening his tone until it matched Barbara's. But this summer I want you to go out with your friends. In fact, I want you to promise me that you will set aside everything in the way of study for this summer." He went over to where she stood and put his hands upon her shoulders so that his look completely encompassed her. "You are so like your mother now, my dear——"

"And mother loved the same things I do," quickly defended Barbara, in turn putting her hands on his shoulders.

"Yes, but not at your age," he argued.

A silence fell between them. The man whose shoulders were straight as a soldier's, in spite of his bending over with constant research work, was now thinking of Barbara's mother. She was gone. Her devotion to nursing during the war had cost her her life with the deadly influenza then ravaging the camps among America's flower of youth. She had been a nurse, just as Barbara was now determined to be, and the research work in bacteriology, which was Dr. Hale's chosen field, had been as fascinating to her as it now threatened to become to Barbara.

"Do you mean, Dads, that we shouldn't do any more experiments this summer?" his daughter asked gently.

"I do, dear. This must be your play season. I've got plenty to do single-handed. I'll miss your help, of course——" he hurried to interject, "but you must promise me, right this minute, to fall in line with the girls and boys——"

"And fall out of line—with you!" Barbara's arms went quickly about his neck and so the promise was given.

"And this is splendid, this affair today," her father continued, when he recovered his composure. "I only wish you had a lot of pretty things——"

"I have, slathers of them," she fibbed bravely. But no mention was made of Cara's offer of the extra party dress.

Nor did she bother to tell her dad that Glenn Gaynor was expected to be at the party. Glenn was the attractive youth who figured so prominently in Barbara's appearance on the beach, when Cara and her girl friends stood at a safe distance, thrilled in admiration.

One hour more—and then she must be at Billows.

CHAPTER IV

ON HER WAY

"JUST for a lark," Barbara told herself, "I'll take the old cap and gown. We are sure to dress up after we undress, and I really haven't a decent robe."

A robe! If she only could have known how this particular item had bothered the other girls, especially Ruth Harrison. The cap and gown which Barbara had decided to take, "just for a lark," were sent her last winter by Marjorie Ellis who achieved them in a brief stay at college and wanted to forget she had ever heard the word. Marjorie hated college now, she had been so homesick while away in Connecticut, that she absolutely refused to return at mid-years, and because she knew Barbara would love even to play at being a collegian, Marjorie sent her the mortar-board hat and the big black cape, they poetically call a gown.

Often had Barbara dressed up in the college clothes, especially at night when she would parade around in the enfolding comfort of that soft, black robe. It was this habit, no doubt, that gave her the idea of fetching the costume to Cara's party. This and the necessity of having something to throw on over her pajamas—how lucky that she had the pajamas?

Packed at last and her misgivings quieted, Barbara ventured a look at herself in the old-fashioned mirror that hung between her room and the sitting-room.

"I guess I'll do," she told the reflection. It showed a tall, finely formed girl, with a head held high—Barbara's head couldn't get enough of sky gazing—and wearing a sport suit that Dora, the maid of all work, had helped her make.

"Good material and not a bad fit," the girl secretly commented, for the natty little jacket was made of bright green flannel, and the skirt of white flannel had a matching stripe of green. Her blouse was white, bought ready made, and a little white felt hat had been picked up at Asbury Park; not picked up on the beach, however, but at a bargain counter very late last fall. So that the costume was quite complete and decidedly effective.

Of course Barbara's hair was bobbed, and because of a little ripple that huddled around her ears the bronzed, glossy tresses framed her face in a most attractive way. Barbara seemed dark and her blue eyes were often taken for brown. Her brown hair might be called brunette, if one didn't see the bronze tones that came in certain lights.

And she wore her clothes well. That was why her own amateur efforts, supplemented by the not unwilling but always protesting Dora, usually turned out well. So she had no fear for the effect of her sport dress upon her arrival at Cara's party; it was the robe and the party dress and other accessories that bothered her somewhat.

"Cara's car is coming out this way, Dads," she told her father as she picked up her bag, "so they're going to stop for me."

"That's fine," her father replied. "Cara's a nice girl——"

"There's a knock; I'll answer," Barbara interrupted, hurrying to the side door. "Oh, it's Nicky and his sister Vicky," she presently explained, for she could see the two Italian children through the glass door; Nickolas and Victoria.

Don't bother with them," her father ordered irritably. "I wish those children would stop coming around here."

"They've got some eggs to sell——"

"We don't need any eggs——"

"Oh, Dads, the poor youngsters have only three eggs to sell and we've got to buy them from them," insisted Barbara, opening her purse with its precious party money in it to give Nicky twenty cents in return for three eggs "just laid."

"And how's granny?" Barbara asked the black-eyed children.

"Fine," said Nicky.

"She ain't either, she's sick," declared Vicky.

"Well, run along," ordered the smiling Barbara, "I'm going out——"

"Say," Nicky squeezed in, "do you want an ole candlestick? I've got one fer half a dollar."

"No, I guess not." Barbara was becoming impatient. "Run along; here's my car," for the toot from Cara's car was sounding along the drive.

"It's a swell candlestick," Nicky argued. "I could get a dollar fer it in Asbury."

"Better go in there and sell it then," almost thundered Dr. Hale, if ever he did speak in a thunderous tone, which he didn't, quite, "and don't fetch any more eggs here——"

"Dads!" pleaded Barbara. "Let them come. Poor little things——"

But Nicky and Vicky were off, scampering as if Dr. Hale had threatened them with a shot-gun.

"Good-bye, Dads," called back Barbara. "Be sure to phone me——"

"I shall—not," replied her father, sending the first two words after Barbara, and blowing the last one against the hall mantle. He would not phone Barbara, not unless there was very urgent need to do so, and there appeared to be no prospect of the latter contingency, just then.

Dora came forth from the pantry, two eggs in one hand and one in the other. Her long face was longer than usual, and her faded eyes seemed about to lose their jell and melt into a little puddle of colorless mucilage.

"There's the eggs," she intoned, as if any one could have mistaken them for tomatoes.

"Yes," echoed Dr. Hale, "I see. But I wish those youngsters would peddle eggs some place else. They're a nuisance."

"Sure are," agreed Dora, "and I don't think Barbara ought to have them trap'sin' around here at all."

Dr. Hale eyed Dora sharply. It was surprising how much audacity a few months' over-due wages could incite. But he had no idea of telling this to Dora.

"Yes, sir," she went on, putting one of the twin eggs in the hand with the singleton, "they're a thieving gang, them Eytalians."

"But those children aren't thieves, Dora," the doctor found courage to say, "and their folks are poor but deserving, I understand."

"You understand *that* from Barbara," Dora retorted adding "sir" when she realized how impertinent the answer really was. "She's too good hearted. I've told her time and again, and there was a report that them Eytalians put a bomb in the hotel——"

"Tut—tut!" checked up the doctor, smiling in a way, but not in a cheerful way. "That old hotel burned itself down when it swallowed a big spark from the trains it must have been very weary listening to. The old Mansion House wasn't bombed by any one, Italian nor others. It just got tired standing there useless and deserted. It was once a merry place, Dora. Many a happy time I had at the Mansion House—before I got to studying bugs, you know," he explained, moving off towards his study.

Dora too moved off, she towards the kitchen.

"Well," she called as she went, "what I'm saying is that Barbara is too fond of trashy folks. And now that she's going out in society she ought to know better!"

If Barbara could only have heard that.

"Going out in society!"

And her reputation endangered by taking up with trashy folks, especially Nicky and Vicky who sold junk candlesticks and new-laid eggs!

In his study Dr. Hale did not at once turn to the unfinished experiment that lay in the tubes before him. He was thinking that Dora was right, in spite of her brusque way of stating the case. There had been very unpleasant rumors current all over Sea Cosset upon more than one occasion, when suspicious fires brought out the volunteer fireman and when daring thefts called for action from the limited police force.

The "Eytalians", as Dora and others called all the foreigners who were huddled in a few old barracks over by the tracks, were not only suspected but openly blamed, and the Marcusi family, to which Nickolas and Victoria belonged, were doubly charged with the crimes, because their father was known to be in prison. He had belonged to a gang, it was said, and he couldn't get away because he was almost a cripple. For years he had tended the railroad gates, and one day he dashed under the gates to let a horse out before the train hit him. That was what happened to Nick's father's leg.

But at his shanty alongside the track some men plotted one night, and whether he was to blame or not, when the midnight train jumped the track because it couldn't escape the ties that had been piled up to derail it, Nickolas Marcusi was found guilty of aiding the plotters. He had protested his innocence, of course, but to have the railroad's property damaged and many lives endangered by a plot actually planned on the railroad itself, seemed too daring to countenance. So Nick Marcusi went to prison and was still there when little Nick and his smaller sister sold Barbara Hale three fresh eggs for her father's dinner.

Dr. Hale was pondering all of this now. He had been sorry for the one-legged gateman; had even tried to intervene for him at court, but people about the sea-coast town were bitter. They despised foreigners, although none of their own class would have tended a railroad gate and risked a life to save a fractious horse.

It was this daring deed that had so enthused Barbara, and she was determined never to turn from her door little Nicky and Vicky—not for Dora nor for a dozen like her! She would buy every egg they brought; she couldn't often buy the junk the children uncovered at the dump, but she had given them fifty cents once for an old pewter mug.

"Heigh-o!" sighed Dr. Hale, turning finally to his test tubes. "It's a hard road for the poor to travel, but harder still for the more unfortunate."

He was seeing little Victoria's face "all eyes" as he spoke harshly about the eggs. He was remembering little Nicky's flying feet as the children scurried off, and he was not blaming Barbara for her interest in the picturesque youngsters.

"There's something fascinating about the genuine," the doctor pursued secretly, "and even a genuine ragamuffin has charm."

The clock in the lower hall chimed four. Barbara would be at the party now, and he was so glad she had gone. Twice Dora had called up the back stairs to ask if he wanted dinner earlier as Barbara would not be home, once she had asked if he would like the eggs "cuddled", she meant coddled, of course, and he said he would. And he even conceded a half-hour in favor of Dora's earlier meal so that she could go to the beach to see the fish boats come in.

Also, there had been two telephone calls to jerk him out of his reverie, and already he was missing Barbara.

And now the door-bell!

"Might as well put work aside for today!" the doctor told himself, for while Dora was preparing a meal she never deigned to answer the door.

"Hey there!" came a shout through the hall. "May I come up?"

"Yes, come along. Glad you are nobody else," called back Doctor Hale, while Glenn Gaynor was already dashing up the stairs.

"Barbara gone?" he asked sharply, as if hoping she wasn't and knowing she was.

"Yes, went long ago," answered the doctor. "You're going to the dance, I hear."

"Oh, I don't know." The boy, who was so big and good-looking that he might well have been called a young man, tossed his cap down impatiently, and folded his brown arms to keep them out of mischief. "I hate these affairs——"

"Now, see here, Glenn," said the doctor, in that unmistakable voice that starts a lecture, "all work and no play, you know——"

"Yes sir, I know," Glenn cut in. "But when a fellow starts they run him to death, and I just can't see these house parties."

"Why go then?" complacently asked the older man.

"Promised Babs, promised Dud and promised his sister, Cara," admitted the complaining youth. "A silly little party, with giggling girls just out of grammar school——"

"Oh, really now, Glenn," laughed Dr. Hale, "they're better than that. They are, I believe high school sophs. And besides—look who is giving this party!"

"Oh, yes *I* know," Glenn almost sneered, "the rich de Burkes," this was a pure mockery, "at Billows, seaside residence of—oh, darn!" he broke off suddenly. "I came over to buy Babs off. I've got tickets for the Music Festival tomorrow night and—I'm due at a—dance!"

Glenn's discomfiture was so boyish it was positively laughable, and Dr. Hale was enjoying it.

"Look out, boy," he warned. "That's just the way a colt acts when he sees a lasso!"

"Lasso! What do you mean, sir?"

"That you may have a better time at the dance than you anticipate," replied Dr. Hale slowly but not solemnly.

CHAPTER V

BILLOWS THE BEAUTIFUL

Imagine trees, so many beautiful trees that they made canopies, tunnels and softest green shelters fit for fairies, for elves and for lovely little children. Outside and beyond this grove, imagine a carpet so green that the sky threw shadows upon it in futile jealousy, gardens so gorgeous that butterflies fluttered over the blooms, bewildered and confused in their temptations and then—just beyond and yet within all of this, think of a House Beautiful!

That was Billows, the summer home of Cara Burke.

A great iron fence raised its palings outside the farthermost borders of the estate. But only the ocean and the ocean drive were thus separated, for acres and acres were shut in behind the iron fence, and one couldn't find the gates unless one knew where to look for them. Greenery everywhere.

Yes, they were very rich, the Burkes, but no one could call them "stuck up," not even the most jealous, or most narrow-minded person at Sea Cosset, who was generally supposed to be old Sarah Jenkins, who sold peppermints and never stopped talking.

And here at the Billows, Cara Burke was holding her first house party, while among those present was Barbara Hale.

"Cara, you should be dressed and down here now," her mother warned from the alcove near the stairs. "The girls are coming——"

"You do the honors, Moma," called back Cara, in a voice quite pardonable if she was a little distance off. "That's just Louise and Esther——"

No pompous butler barred the way, for the massive doors were open wide and the laughter of young girls was echoing clear up to Cara's dressing-room, while Sniffy, the black poodle, bumped himself down the stairs to find out what it was all about.

"Come right along, girls," Mrs. Burke welcomed the first arrivals, Esther, Louise, and Lida. "Cara will be down directly."

The girls hesitated, overwhelmed by the beauty of the flowers and soft lights. They were already familiar with the house and its luxurious furnishings, but the urns and vases filled with blooms beneath the silken floor lamps made the rooms look like a scene from some gorgeous theatrical set.

"I waited for Ruth," Esther was saying, "but she didn't come over. Then we drove over there and she was gone, in a taxi, her mother said."

"Here she is now!" proclaimed Louise, for the rollicking Ruth was tripping up the stone steps, suit-case dangling by her.

" 'Low girls!" she called out. "I missed you! But I got the worth of my money from old Taxi-Dermot," she declared, "I made him drive me down along the ocean, and then—so that every one might see me, I directed him to drive past the tennis court——"

"Here's Cara," interrupted Louise. "Ruth, you didn't shake hands with Mrs. Burke," she whispered to the obstreperous Ruth, although Mrs. Burke had by now disappeared, leaving the scene to Cara and Sniffy.

Greetings and exclamations peculiar to girls who are only growing up and think they have already grown up, were being perfunctorily exchanged, when Cara's car, almost noiselessly, rolled up the drive, and then a shadow appeared in the doorway. This time it was the Burke's chauffeur, Dixon, and the suit-case he primly placed in the hall, over near the carved wooden settee, was none other than Barbara Hale's.

"Oh, here's Barbara!" exclaimed Cara, happily, rushing forward to greet the latest and last arrival, Barbara, in her green and white sport suit with the close-fitting white felt hat.

Cara gushed and gurgled, saying every pleasant thing she could think of and all but kissing Barbara, but it seemed as if all the joy was between those two. The other girls had fallen back a little, into a group of their own, and just then Barbara wondered if she were going be treated as an interloper, an outsider.

Were they not glad to meet her?

"Girls!" called out Cara, " you all know Barbara, don't you? We met her at the committee meeting, you know," she pointed out breathlessly. "Barbara, this is Louise, and Lida, and you must know Ruth? Ruth Harrison——"

"Oh yes, I know Ruth," interrupted the embarassed Barbara, for she was feeling the same old catch in her breath which she always experienced when meeting a lot of strange girls.

But presently the ice was broken and the waters of sociability oozed along, if a little halting, when Esther blocked their way with her little snowball about Barbara being "a stranger in Sea Cosset, if she did live only just across the line."

Of course Esther had to say that. "Just

across the line", as if a few scrub pines and a couple of wild fields could really make any difference in climate or territory. But one place was ordinary, Landing, the other exclusive, Sea Cosset.

Were they going to snub her? Cara's profuse welcome seemed to Barbara a little strained, as if Cara were trying to cover up something. Only Ruth Harrison attempted to put Barbara at her ease and she undertook to criticize clothes.

"Now, that's what I call a nifty little costume," spoke out Ruth without an attempt at politeness. "Wherever did you get a rig like that, Barbara?"

Wherever did she get it? Barbara winced a little, then burst out laughing.

"No use trying to put on airs," she declared gaily. "This is home-made and the cook helped me out."

After that they all "joined in the chorus." Every one told about where her clothes were bought, (if not actually quoting the prices) and there was more joy over a bargain—it was Ruth's sport stockings two-ninety-eight, regular four dollars—than over the wonderful lace tracery on the side of Louise's really lovely tub-silk dress.

Clothes! And Barbara would barely trust herself to utter the tricky little word!

"But are we all here?" Cara presently asked, for they were still hanging around the door, as if the arrival had not been completed.

Ruth counted six and that was all expected.

"Then let's get the bags put away and go outside," proposed Cara. "Since you haven't been travelling——"

"But we have!" joked Ruth. "Didn't I make the Taxi-Dermot drive me all over the world in his rattle-box?"

"Then perhaps *you* want to change," suggested Cara in the same joking manner. "You must be worn out, Ruthie dear," she mocked. "I'll have my maid help you into a warm baa-th——"

"You will not! I've been in the ocean and if I don't walk straight I'll spoil something, for my ears are leaking the briny," chuckled Ruth, merrily.

Barbara was merely looking on and listening. She felt out of place, even awkward, but she knew how to affect poise even if she didn't feel it. Yes, she had needed the companionship of girls; there was no denying that, she was secretly willing to admit.

Up the stairs they raced, suit-cases banging along with them, while Sniffy, the poodle, turned up his little black nose and went the other way. The Burkes might not have been of the class picturesquely called "high-hat" which is the newer word for high-toned, but Sniffy was worse than that. He was snobby. *He* hadn't any use for giggling girls and he gruntily resented their invasion of the beautiful Billows.

"I was going to have a drawing for room-mates," Cara told the girls who were now all gathered in her gold and green room. "But honestly, girls, I just——"

"Oh, we know you want Barbara——"

"Babs," corrected Cara. "We're going to call you Babs, aren't we?" she asked the girl who was lost in admiration of a marine scene that hung between the two latticed windows.

"Let's get out while it's so lovely——" suggested Esther, and in that little suggestion one might have noticed that Esther was adroitly managing to divert attention from Babs. For which Babs was thankful, although Esther could not possibly have known that.

Suit-cases unpacked and room-mates assigned, presently they were racing off to the tennis court although apparently no one was going to play.

"Too hot," was the verdict on that suggestion, but it was more likely too much trouble; and besides, Esther and Louise at least were not dressed for tennis.

It was all very unreal to Barbara. These beautiful grounds, the gaily dressed girls, so carefree, so frivolous and more than anything else, so girlish. It must be fine to feel free from anxiety. There were Dora's wages, due, and Dr. Hale's bills not coming in promptly, there were the cultures for experiments to be paid for and they were so expensive. And now, if her father was determined to shut her help out, that would mean also the loss of Glenn Gaynor's assistance, for he worked with Barbara, enjoying the experiments and calling them fun when they worked them out together. He would hardly enjoy Dr. Hale's professional methods; what boy, working alone, would?

Words are halting and inadaquate to express the mental flashes that pictured all this in Barbara's mind, for it came as clearly and as quickly as the penetrating gleams of the late afternoon sunshine, as they shot through indifferent clouds. Not even the insistence of the girls' laughter nor Cara's challenge to knocking up balls, could disguise the reality of the worries she had tried and failed to leave behind her at home.

And clothes! Clothes! How they mocked her now! She who could sally forth triumphantly in a skirt, unhemmed (frayed out for effect!); in a sweater that Dora made for the church fair and it didn't sell, in a hat—no, without a hat. Around home and in her unhampered outdoor life all of this and even worse was all right, rather individual and by no means a hardship. But now, here with these daintily dressed girls, of whom even the careless Ruth Harrison admitted paying two dollars and a half for sport stockings, here Barbara fully realized her shabbiness.

They were seated on the low, white Roman benches, and Cara, who was wearing a simple but lovely white flannel, had just jumped up to bat a few balls over or under the net. Glad of a chance to relieve her misgivings with some positive action, Barbara quickly followed, and these two girls were again apart from the others, rather unintentionally.

"I told you," remarked Esther to Louise.

"What?" demanded Louise.

"What? Why that," pointing to the flying figures at the tennis net.

"Well, what of it? Cara asked *us* to play, didn't she?" Louise was not going to let a small thing like Cara's open preference for Barbara spoil her good time.

"Isn't she wonderfully athletic?" pointed out Lida. She meant Barbara and she meant the remark to be a compliment.

"Oh, yes." Esther's eyebrows went up quizzically.

"Whew!" whistled Ruth Harrison. "Look at that jump! And *we* sit here like bumps on logs. Say girls, if we're not going to 'bust' our new clothes doing that, we had better find something else to do. As a grandstand this bench isn't big enough," and she tried to push Louise off at the other end.

It was presently agreed that the non-players should go down to the lake. The lake was accessible from one end of the grounds, and when Ruth called out the glad news to Cara, she, Cara, insisted upon going too.

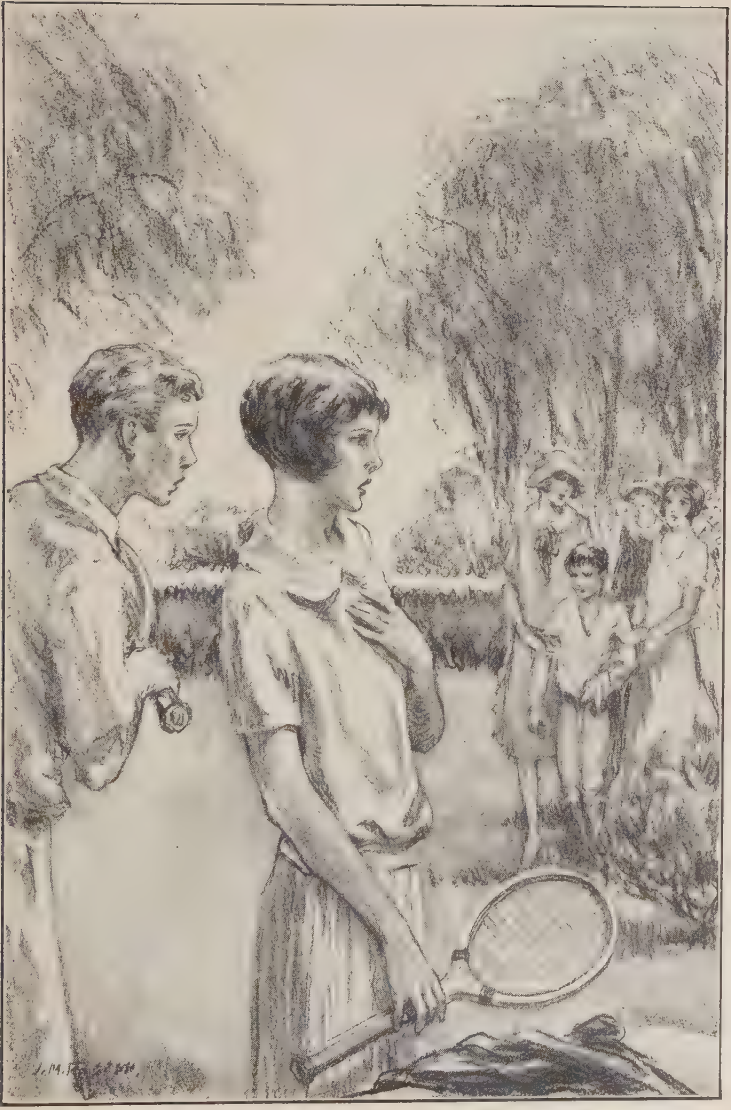
That her other guests were missing her while she batted balls with Barbara, Cara easily guessed, but as they planned a boat ride Barbara hesitated.

"I just love this exercise and really need it," she demurred. "Let me play around here and you go along for your sail," she entreated Cara.

"And leave you all alone?" sang out little Lida.

"All by my loney," laughed Barbara. "Don't worry about me, I'm all right," and she continued to bat balls against the high wire net that served to keep them within bounds.

Cara hesitated. "I am determined to let



"OH!" GASPED BARBARA. "IT'S NICKY! AND HE'S HURT!"

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every girl do just as she pleases," she remarked. "But I hate to leave you alone, Babs."

"Please do," begged Barbara. "I'm having a wonderful time," and she sprang for a ball that tried to escape her racket, while Ruth again shouted merrily in applause.

Cara, Lida, Ruth, Louise and Esther, comprising the entire house party with Barbara excepted, started off along the winding path to the lake. Unconsciously Barbara sighed. It was good to be left alone.

CHAPTER VI

THE ACCIDENT

SHE should not have come. Somehow she didn't seem to belong. For a single second Barbara considered flight. A glance towards the freedom of the road made the girl feel like a prisoner within those fairy-like grounds.

Then: "How silly!" her better judgment prompted, "when you know Cara wants you and the other girls—well, who could blame them for thinking one different when one felt different, acted differently, and was different?"

"Dad and Dora are just about now talking of the fun I'm having," she reflected, as a cynical little titter rippled over her lips. But presently the racket again swung into action, and from the lake beyond the grove floated back gales of laughter. Those girls knew how to have a good time. *They* knew how to play.

"Born that way, I suppose," Barbara continued to reason, "while I was born with a genius for a father and an angel for a mother. No wonder I'm different," she decided, her sense of humor at least being all of its kind that any girl could wish for.

That so-called saving, sense of humor! Well, if it didn't actually save one it helped a lot, Barbara Hale was perfectly willing to admit that fact at this very moment.

Bing! Biff! Bat! How the balls flew! And how her muscular young arm served that delicately strung racket, as finely adjusted as a precious violin and probably as well beloved by its proud possessor.

But the racket didn't belong to Barbara. Cara had snatched it up from a bench and handed it to her when they entered the court. Now, Barbara paused to note the burnt-in letters the racket was marked with; Dudley Burke. Yes, it belonged to Cara's brother, Dud, and he had a local reputation as a crack tennis player. Naturally interested in sports, she was also interested in its advocates, and as if her thoughts had gone by wireless, at this instant a boy's whistle sounded through the shrubbery.

Barbara started guiltily. Why? All alone in the strange grounds, a stranger—what would the girls say if they should come along? Perhaps that she had stayed behind them just for this chance. But she had not, of course. The wish to be alone had prompted her, only that. But now, here was Dudley Burke. She knew it before she saw him, and being essentially honest she admitted, secretly, that she was glad he had come!

"Hello!" came a cheery greeting from between the mulberry trees. "Where's—Cara?"

"Gone to the lake," Barbara replied easily, for the boy was not exactly a stranger to her. She had met him with Glenn at the hotel tennis match.

"Practicing?"

"With your racket——"

"Oh, help yourself. Plenty of them spoiling around here. Feel like a little game?"

Barbara's face was being transformed from that brooding serious picture of a few moments ago, to the image of a pretty girl, blushing happily and responding naturally to the comradeship offered her.

What if she did prefer boys to girls? Or if she thought she did? Wasn't Glenn the best playmate a girl ever had? So generously understanding and so free from petty criticism, was Glenn.

"I'm afraid I shouldn't be on the court in these shoes," she answered Dudley, while she thought of so many other things. "They have heels——"

"Never mind the heels," he interrupted. "This will be rolled tomorrow, besides those are little heels," he finished, not knowing that the better word might have been "low" for heels.

Dudley was like Cara, good-looking in a very general way and with that same easy gracefulness that made Cara so attractive. But his hair! Red! The very reddest-red, bleached a little now by the summer sun, but red for all that. He should have had blue eyes, but Barbara wasn't wondering about the color of his eyes—although Cara always called them green—she wasn't wondering about anything, as a matter of fact, she was just deciding.

Queer, how easy it was for her to fall into comradeship with a boy. Dudley Burke wasn't guessing at the price of her shoes, or her stockings or wondering where she got "that rig." But he was curious to know how she sprinted like any fellow would, and how she put up such a good game of tennis, anyway.

Tennis surely is the game for boys and girls, and these two were throwing so much energy and enthusiasm into it they could not help getting proportionate enjoyment from it. Time passed quickly, too quickly for both of them. Then, suddenly Barbara remembered she had promised to follow the girls to the lake.

"I'm afraid I'll have to stop," she said reluctantly, panting a little. "This is lots of fun, but I promised to meet the girls——"

"Oh, yes," drawled the boy, shaking his head in mockery. "This here house party, of course ——" He did a few tricks with his racket then sprang around to get Barbara's jacket which she had left on the bench.

"Oh, let me show you something," he exclaimed, as he reached for his own coat. "Mother's 'nuts' on old junk, and look what I just bought!" He was holding up an old candlestick.

"Why," faltered Barbara, "isn't that—where-ever did you get that?" she asked quickly altering the original form of her question.

"Couple of kids. It's brass." He was rubbing the tarnished metal with his handkerchief. "Two funny little Dagoes waylaid me down the road. Suppose they snibbied it——"

"Nicky and Vicky wouldn't steal anything."

"Nicky and Vicky! Do you know the youngsters?"

"They sell fresh eggs," Barbara hastily explained, instantly regretting her thoughtless defense of the two little Italians. But for some reason, which she could not have named, she felt that the children needed defending.

Dudley was toying with the queer old candlestick.

"Well, this isn't so bad, and Mother has what Sis calls a junk complex. Funny how those kids pick up things."

"They really search in the dumps, you know," Barbara interrupted. She was just seeing Nicky and Vicky searching in the dump and how they must have rejoiced when they had discovered the candlestick.

"Yes." Dudley hesitated, then added: "I gave them a whole 'buck' for this, but they only asked a half-dollar. They looked as if they needed a lot more." He tossed his head to one side boyishly as he said that.

"They do." Barbara replied quickly. "Their father is—in prison, you know. He used to be gate-keeper at the tracks over at Stonybend, and he got in some trouble, which lots of people think he had nothing to do with. Dad says it's an outrage for the state to take a man from his family and leave a poor woman to support them." Her voice was seething with indignation, as any reference to that story always made her angry.

"So it is. The poor kids! No wonder they have to dig in the dumps. I wish I'd given them more money——"

A sudden shrill of voices checked Dudley's remarks. Along the winding path a flutter of light dresses broke through the greenery. There seemed to be some excitement.

"Here come the girls and—what's the matter?" Barbara exclaimed, for the girls were coming back and some one with them was crying!

"Some youngster——" Dudley barely said before he was hurrying to meet Cara and her companions.

"Oh!" gasped Barbara. "It's Nicky! And he's hurt!"

Between Cara and Ruth, Nicky was being led along, splotches of ugly red staining a bandage that had been wound around the little fellow's wrist. He was not crying, but his sister Vicky was. She was in the charge of Louise and Esther, who vainly tried to assure the frightened child that her brother would be all right, and that she shouldn't cry so.

"What happened?" Dudley asked as quickly as his question could be heard, for every one seemed to be talking at once.

"He fell into the lake and cut his arm on some glass," Cara replied. "I'm glad you're here, Dud——"

"Oh, it ain't nauthin'" protested the boy bravely. "I often get cut——"

"But not like this," Cara insisted. "He had better have it dressed. We were just coming in when we saw him——"

"I'd be home now——"

"A good thing you didn't go home, Nicky," Barbara told him authoritatively. "You might scare your granny to death with all that blood."

"Oh, she isn't scary." The boy was wincing with pain, and the pallor of suffering made his dark eyes look strangely old and unreal in his small sharp face.

Dudley sort of brushed the girls aside and now had his arm around Nicky.

"We'll see a doctor, kid," he said kindly. "Then there'll be no come-back——"

"I don't want no doctor," the boy exclaimed excitedly.

"He won't hurt you," assured Dudley trying to inspire courage.

" 'T'aint the hurt. I'm not afraid, but——"

Barbara guessed why the boy feared any one who might seem to be an official; even a doctor had some authority, and she quickly understood Nicky's fear. His father had been taken away by officials, and he had not been allowed to come back. How could the child be expected to forget that dreadful scene that had left them worse off than if they had been orphans?

"I'll tell you," Barbara exclaimed, "we'll go see my dad. You know him, Nicky, and he's a good doctor——"

"But Dr. Landes is just at the corner," Louise tried to suggest. "Why not go to him?"

"It won't take but a few minutes to run over to Dr. Hale's," Dudley decided. "And my car is in the drive. What about Little Sister?" He referred to Vicky who by now had ceased her wailing.

"I'm going to give Little Sister some ice cream," Cara announced brightly. "Won't that be nice?"

Vicky seemed to think it would be, so she allowed herself to be led towards the house, while Dudley and Barbara took the wounded boy to the auto.

"Sure I'm not goin' to no strange doctor?" the child questioned before he would set foot into the pretty little sport car with the "rumble seat" in the back. Barbara was to occupy that place, while Dudley and Nickolas rode in front.

"We're going to my house," Barbara answered him frankly. "You don't think I'd fool you?"

"No; I guess not, you wouldn't. But this don't hurt much. Who's going to brung Vicky home?"

"She'll get a car ride too," replied Dudley, supposing that would be cheering news.

"But no strangers don't dast fetch her home!" cried the boy quivering with excitement.

"Why?" asked Dudley.

"Can't no strangers go to our house," the boy protested. His excitement was alarming, for the bandage around his hand was now dripping blood.

"Oh, look!" cried Barbara, "how your hand bleeds! You must keep quiet. Here, take this——"

"Wait a minute: I have some cheesecloth in the back of the car," said Dudley, pulling into the curb so that he might stop the car. When he stepped out to get the cheesecloth from under the rumble seat, he whispered to Barbara:

"Seems to have something to hide at his house."

"Oh, that's because of the trouble—his father you know," she also whispered. The cheesecloth had already been cut in convenient duster sizes so that it was no trouble to wind a few of the spotless pieces around Nicky's wounded hand.

Settled once more, upon Barbara's assurance that they would go straight back to Billows and get Vicky just as soon as the cut was dressed, again Dudley turned his car towards the homestead and office of Dr. Hale.

CHAPTER VII

NICKY AND VICKY

Nicky wasn't a bit afraid of Dr. Hale. He scarcely flinched as the deep cut was washed and dressed, Barbara acting as nurse and Dora acting foolishly.

She couldn't see why Barbara had to bother with those "young uns," and she didn't see, anyhow, why Barbara had to leave the party "on account of a boy's cut hand."

Because Dudley was present, although he was too well-bred to show his amusement, for Dora did "take on" as no maid would be expected to do, out of her place and all that, yet Barbara could not safely ask her to desist. Such rashness, Barbara feared, might precipitate something worse, as Dora was always "free with her tongue."

Quiet and dignified, Dr. Hale took care of his little patient and what Dora lacked in giving the home the stamp of order, surely he, personally, supplied with his courtliness.

Dudley was keenly interested in the laboratory equipment, as Barbara told him to look things over while he waited, and he expressed the wish of coming in with Glenn some day, to see how things worked.

Finally the wound was all fixed up, and Dr. Hale asked Nicky how it felt.

"Fine," he replied, smiling now in evident relief.

"How did you do it?" Barbara asked.

"Duckin'," replied Nicky.

"What for?" Dudley wanted to know.

"Fer the half-dollar you gim-me."

"Oh, you lost your candlestick money?" Barbara exclaimed.

"Yes; Vicky wanted to see the picture on it and she dropped it in. I got to be goin'." Nicky was again getting anxious about the little sister.

"Yes, we're going," Dudley told him, meanwhile saying good-bye to Dr. Hale. But Barbara had suddenly disappeared.

She had dashed up to her own room, and was standing with her back to the door, as if that would shut out everything else.

"I don't want to go back," she sighed. "I hate girls' parties and——" She never gave in to such emotion, she wouldn't cry about anything so unimportant and yet—her eyes were brimming!

"Clothes, clothes!" she fairly bit at the words. "All girls care for is clothes." And this was a frank confession that she too cared a lot about clothes, else why was she being so upset over them?

"And they'll probably say I just wanted to run off this way in Dudley's car." Another unpleasant thought, but there might have been a good reason behind it, for Louise and Esther had both called after her. They had been joking of course, and while their words were something about not "running away or going on too long a ride," it would have been stupid not to understand just what they meant. They were teasing her about playing tennis, first, and going car riding, second, with Dudley.

"I'll just show them how much I care about their old party," Barbara pouted, sliding down into her comfortable arm chair. "Poverty suits me—when it's my own."

Her eyes reluctantly swept the room with its uncompromising shabbiness. Perhaps within her eyes the picture of those other rooms, Cara's, refused to be obliterated; at any rate, her things had never before looked so ugly, so old, so faded, and so—so hateful. They almost made her shiver. That dresser with brass handles, when they might easily have been changed for glass.

And a mantlepiece! As if a mantle were of any possible beauty or use!

"Barbara! Babs!"

Her father calling. "Dear Dads!" This was not a sigh of self-pity. "It isn't his fault. I wonder why brains, real brains are sold so cheap? Yes, Dad," she answered, patting her face with the powder puff, "I'm coming." She was on her feet again and going back to the party. Of course she would *have* to go. Nicky's accident had seemed like a temporary release, but she must go back to Cara's.

Nicky!

Why was he fearful of Dudley Burke or any stranger going to his place? Yes, he must have something to hide.

"And I'll just see that he hides it," Barbara determined bitterly, as if Nicky's troubles were so like her own, and as if he too had a right to protect himself from strangers' interference. But what was he hiding? She wondered, as she tried to cover up the signs of her rebellion, tried to recapture the expression of happiness which she had shed when she slammed the door of her room.

Well, she would go, but she was going to hate everything. Cara was lovely and not really a "goody-goody," patronizing kind of girl. She did like Cara. And her brother too, was splendid. He could play tennis; perhaps they would have a game after dinner.

But the other girls probably wouldn't want to play. And she, Barbara, must not ignore all the conventions.

"I'll be down in one moment!" she called again.

Nicky was already out in the car. What a little fighter he was! How the children of the poor do learn to fight for their own! He was bound to go for little Vicky and to bring her home himself. No auto ride would lure him from what he believed was his duty; not Nicky.

Another little squeezing hug for her father and a call to Dora and Barbara sprang into the rumble seat of Dudley's car.

"We're going for little sister," he told her, tossing his red-head to one side in that characteristic gesture with which she was already familiar. "Guess she'll have her ice-cream finished now. But Nicky must have some too."

"I couldn't wait. I gotta hurry up. Never mind the ice-cream," bravely renounced the boy.

"We'll put it in a—a pail," declared Dudley laughingly. "You've got to have some ice-cream after all your trouble, boy. We'll see to that."

" 'T'aint no trouble. Don't hurt hardly a bit," he protested again, as if ashamed of the trouble he was making for others.

"And I'll bet you didn't get the half-dollar?" Dudley pressed further.

"Nope, I didn't."

"Then we must fix that up, too. You ought to hear the stories of deep-sea diving about some boys in other countries." Dudley was trying to be entertaining. "They just throw money in the water, folks do, to see the fellows dive after it."

"I know," answered Nicky.

"Perhaps you've seen pictures of it in magazines," ventured Barbara.

"Yeah, I did. My father used to get lots of magazines from the train men."

There was silence for a time after that. Likely both Barbara and Dudley were blaming the state for having cut off even that opportunity for poor little Nicky. It hadn't been much; just cast-off magazines, but they must have been educating, and they must have given real pleasure to the Italian gate-keeper's family. But now he was in prison, just because he had been in company with bad men. But the public must be protected, although Barbara was not reasonable enough, just then, to think of that.

"We don't have to ride home," mumbled Nicky, as Dudley turned his car in under the towering trees that arched the roadway to Billows. "We can walk just as well."

"But why not ride?" demanded Dudley. "That's what this little bus is for."

"I'll tell you," chimed in Barbara. "We'll drive you as far as the tracks and you can walk home from there. Then, if your grandmother sees you coming she won't be frightened as she might be if she saw you coming in a car."

"Ye-ah, that's right, that'll be fine," brightened Nicky, shifting around in the seat and plainly showing by his general brightness of manner what a relief that suggestion had brought him. "Ye-ah, that'll be fine," he repeated more than once, kicking the car with his very dirty bare feet, his joy seeming to affect his very toes.

"All right," assented Dudley, "you're boss. We'll dump you anywhere you say. And oh, wait," he slipped his hand into his pocket, here's a dollar to make up for your ducking and your cutting. And if you find any more fancy junk let me know."

Nicky's good luck seemed to be increasing, and he smiled broadly as he used his left hand to tuck the dollar bill into some sort of pocket. Queer, Barbara thought, how little boys can depend upon pockets in such tattered clothing, but somehow the pockets always did prove reliable.

Who ever heard of a real *boy* losing money?

They found little sister ready to relinquish her hold on the ice-cream spoon, and to open her other hand to allow the cake crumbs to trickle through her brown fingers upon the plate Cara had set before her.

All the girls were gathered around the child, for Cara and Ruth had managed to get her talking and she had furnished them with quite an entertainment. They asked her all sorts of foolish questions, and even the cynical Esther did find cause for a good laugh when Victoria, aged four and a half years, tried to tell them what she learned at school—in her one week's attendance there, just before school closed. It wasn't anything like any one else had ever learned, according to Vicky. And even this little tot also appeared worried about her home, and kept asking for Nicky, constantly. When she finally understood that he was back from the doctor's and ready to take her home, no amount of coaxing could get a reply from her.

"Goin' home," was her declaration. "Me and Nicky. Nobody else."

Cara and the other girls had attached no significance to their insistence that "nobody else" should go along, but when Dudley offered to put her in the car she pulled back and shouted:

"You can't go to our house!"

Even Barbara laughed and tried to assure her that only Nicky was to take her home. Nicky called out that it was "all right, come along and hurry up," but even then it took considerable persuading to get her into the auto.

"Hey there, Babs!" called Ruth good-naturedly, "why can't some of the rest of us play nurse?"

"Yes," chimed in Louise, "why can't we take a ride?"

"That's the way with a girl who gets into a nice little sport car," Ruth continued to jokingly bewail, "she won't get out. Here *I* could fit in there just as well as not."

"Oh, come along," interrupted Dudley. "I've got to get back."

"And Babs might just as well finish the job," Cara declared, perhaps a little anxious to have the "job" finished, for it was certainly very greatly interfering with her party.

Finally Dudley gave warning that he was ready and going to start, and then they were off.

Barbara held little Vicky in the back seat and its box-like arrangement at first appeared to frighten the child. She seemed to think it would snap shut on them, but again her brother's words of assurance quieted her fears.

"Only to the track," Nicky reminded Dudley as they neared the crossing. "Ain't far from there."

"All right, kid," replied the boy driving, "we'll dump you wherever you say."

"And don't worry," said Barbara emphatically, "no one is going to your house, Nicky. We don't even know where you live."

"Sure," said Nicky, his face beaming happily, as his friend Barbara Hale offered him the positive assurance that he might hide away from her and from her well-meaning friends.

CHAPTER VIII

CLOTHES

On their way back, naturally Dudley talked of the Italian children.

"What do you suppose those youngsters are so worried about? Seemed to be dreadfully afraid that we would find out something; didn't they?" he asked Babs.

"Yes. But, after all, don't you think people do spy dreadfully upon poor folks, if they happen to be interested in them?" Barbara returned.

"Spy?" Dudley seemed to resent that.

"Oh, you know what I mean," Barbara quickly drew back. "I mean they think they have to know all about the people they help. I've often seen that, when we had a sewing circle and gave aprons to poor women, the women of the sewing circle almost wanted a report upon every time the old aprons were worn." Barbara could not hide her dislike for the prying social service sort.

Dudley laughed at that. "I suppose they are nosey," he said merrily, "when they give away a few pennies they seem to think they have a right to butt in on everything. Well, I've got to say, I am a bit curious just the same. Those youngsters *know*. They learn a lot because they need to know it."

"Dad says every creature is like that. Animals have developed all their traits through necessity," Barbara answered seriously.

"You know a lot too," laughed the boy. "Not that *you* need to." This was sort of an apology.

"Oh, but I do," insisted Barbara, in turn laughing at the idea. "Knowledge is power, you know."

"Yes—maybe." He paused as he swung his car around a corner. "You know I lost on your coming to this party," he continued presently. "I bet you wouldn't come."

"Too bad I came."

"Oh, no. Glad I lost, really, I'm awfully glad you came." He was wagging that red head of his like an animated signal light. "You see, Cara is an awfully good sport."

"I know that."

"Oh say! I'm getting myself in trouble," he laughed again. "I mean, she's better and more than just a sister to a fellow; she's a whole family."

They were almost within sight of Billows and

Barbara noticed that Dudley had slowed down. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

"You see," he pursued, "the girls all think you're sort of different."

"Why?" Barbara asked so suddenly and so frankly that Dudley's cheeks flared. He couldn't have been blushing, yet his face certainly had gone red.

"Oh," he faltered, "I suppose because you don't run around a lot. And then, you are so fond of study."

"I hate it," flung back Barbara, unconsciously shifting her position, which was alongside of him since Nicky's departure.

"I mean, studying with your father."

"That isn't studying at all; it's just experimenting. Don't you like to experiment?"

"Sometimes and with some things!" He sang that out in a way that meant he liked a lark, liked fun, and liked to try out things that gave him any fun in their trying.

But whether intentionally or not, he had admitted to Barbara the general opinion held of her. She was different; Cara called it elusive, Esther would have said it was stand-offish and Louise had been heard to declare that Barbara Hale was just plain "stuck-up."

But Barbara knew. She might have had all of these various personalities but she alone knew just why she was different. And she wasn't telling Dudley Burke, either. Not that he had an idea of expecting such a confidence, but she had come to Cara's party and he rejoiced in that fact. She felt sort of tricked into an unpleasant situation.

"It's too bad," she remarked presently, "that Nicky's accident had to take so much time. It must have spoiled all Cara's fun this afternoon."

"But it hasn't mine," blurted out Dudley. "I'd rather drive around with a boy's cut-up arm than to stick around——"

"With girls!"

"I didn't mean that."

"You—certainly did."

"All right then, with *some* girls."

"I won't have you talk about my friends," Barbara was laughing but not willing to understand the boy as he wanted her to.

"And *you* love them too, don't you?" Dudley could play her evasion game quite as well as she could do it herself.

"Why, of course I like the girls!" she flung back with so much fervor that any one could see she was fearing a suspicion. She didn't want Dudley to think she was so unsocial as not to care for her new companions.

The boy continued to tease. He brought up the subject of her preference for Glenn Gaynor.

"Glenn's more to your taste, I guess," he remarked with assumed indifference. "He knows something; girls are mostly dumb-bells."

"Now Dudley, you don't want to scrap, do you? I told you I *liked* the girls." Certainly as a boy *he* was frank.

"Well, anyhow," he drawled. "I'm awfully glad you came, for I don't like them—all."

There was neither any use for nor time for further arguments. They were rolling down the drive, and the girls waiting for them were squealing things about Babs being mean to stay away, and the whole thing looking like a put-up job, so they managed to make known.

Barbara expected all this, for indeed it did look queer for her to have been away from the girls practically all the afternoon. But Cara made peace by hastily managing to get all the other girls, excluding Barbara, into the little car. Two were assigned to the front seat with Dud, and three in the rumble seat. Then she made Dudley give them a ride.

"Anywhere," she urged. "Just for a ride," and the brother understood that she was trying to please the girls by having him "show them off around town."

"You can play with Sniffy," she laughingly told Barbara, as once more the little car left the grounds, this time the driver reluctantly turning towards the ocean.

"I've got to dress for dinner, you know," he reminded Cara, as he picked up speed "and——"

"Oh, we just want a whiff of ocean breeze," she cut him short, while the giggling girls each hoped that her particular friends in Sea Cosset would see her as they flew.

Barbara entered the big house and turned at once to the room assigned her. She felt very dusty and upset and therefore needed freshing up. Also, she welcomed the chance to privately arrange her things, although she was determined not to feel self-conscious about her clothes.

Clothes!

The word was like a stone wall against which she was continually bumping her head. There seemed no escape from it, and to the girl who so lately had positively ignored the word when it loomed up in capital letters, the sudden necessity of taking it seriously was very discomforting. Barbara hated to feel limited by her appearance. Not that she didn't love pretty things, but because she felt them beyond her reach. She was obliged to build up some other real interest, and that had come to her as she naturally developed an aptitude for helping her father.

Bugs, germs, cultures, and the other symbols of bacteriology meant more to Barbara than frocks, hats, and articles of dainty apparel, dear to the heart of every normal girl.

She was simply sacrificing her natural inclinations to those forced upon her. But being a girl, almost care-free and decidedly courageous, Barbara Hale hardly knew that she was making any sacrifice at all.

In Cara's lovely green and gold room now, she had no intention of analyzing the situation. But somehow now that she was here she actually felt she liked it.

A little chuckle escaped her as she took from her bag the student's gown and the black cap. Her best stockings, the new pair called "atmosphere" had been packed into the cap.

"Silly to bring it," she reflected, "but I had to have something." She shook out the robe and surveyed the mortar-board hat critically.

An extra clothes' tree had been placed by her bed (one of the twins), just where she would be sure to understand that the articles hung upon it were intended for her.

Thoughtful Cara! A beautiful lavender cloud of georgette proved to be a party dress. Barbara touched it gingerly and then, since the mute thing didn't bite her, she became more familiar with it and examined it, closely.

How lovely! Shaded lavender from orchid to purple with a golden silk slip to throw the colors out. There was also a soft gray skirt with a pearl-gray blouse and a velveteen short coat of jade green.

"But the girls would know," she was thinking when she espied a note pinned to the skirt. It was from Cara, of course, and it hinted that Bab's aunt in New York had surprised her with a box of lovely things. This was the excuse suggested as Bab's explanation if the girls seemed suspicious.

"Why not?" Cara had asked naïvely in her note. "You could have an aunt in New York, couldn't you? And she could send you things?"

A twinge of hurt pride pricked Barbara at the idea. Cara was just a jolly fun-loving girl, who believed it perfectly fair and square to defend any reasonable situation with a reasonable excuse; but then it was not Cara who was being defended. It was easy to do it for some one else, but would she herself have accepted it?

No, Barbara did not love clothes well enough to go to much trouble for them. She was afraid she wouldn't have much fun in Cara's finery, although it was certainly lovely. But neither would she feel right to refuse and hurt Cara. Which would be worse? To hurt her own pride or to hurt Cara's generosity?

"Oh, clothes!" she repeated again, "what a nuisance they are, either to have or to need! They're not really of such importance and yet we are so proud we feel we must be all decked out like the poor helpless Christmas trees. Everything must dazzle us or we don't want it," she reflected cynically.

The room about her was beautiful indeed, soft and soothing in its tones of gold and green, with no trifling objects stuck around to offend the best taste. But except for a small row of books held by two painted book-ends (from Italy) there was nothing in the whole room to indicate mental personality. Cara was not reflected in her room.

Barbara's room at home was old-fashioned, shabby, even cluttered with books and bookish attributes, but it fairly shouted the name and personality of Barbara Hale. Cara's was the work of an expert decorator; Barbara's the result of her own individuality.

Shaking out the few garments upon which so much seemed to depend, Barbara hurried now to change for dinner. She would wear the little tub silk, its yellow and black stripes were vivid enough to be especially summery, and although it was home-made, she felt there could be nothing wrong with it. It's simplicity saved it from complications.

"I suppose the other girls will wear more fancy things," Babs reasoned, "but this is all right." So the striped tub silk was chosen as a dinner dress, and, just as Barbara had expected, it proved to be all right.

The girls were back from their ride and now made a merry, if somewhat noisy, entrance.

"Easy to tell there is a boy within hearing," was Barbara's sly reflection, for the way the girls giggled and chattered indicated an audience. They never would have taken so much trouble merely to amuse themselves.

"Oh, Babs!" called out Cara. "You missed it, we went slumming down the railroad way."

"Slumming!" repeated Barbara, a sudden fear taking possession of her. Could they have sought out the little Italians to whom she had promised no interference? "Whatever did you go down the railroad for?" she asked breathlessly.

"Just for fun," prattled Cara. "The girls wanted Dud to take them where he took you, and he bet they wouldn't enjoy the ride." Cara was peeling off her things and preparing to put on something pretty for dinner. Barbara hardly knew how to question her without exciting suspicion, but she just had to know whether or not those "giddy things" had bothered poor little Nicky.

"Did you see the—Italian children?" Barbara finally managed to ask in a tone she hoped was natural.

"I should say we did see them!" chanted Cara. "And say, Babs, they're the funniest kids——"

"Why? How are they funny?"

"Because they are trying to hide something in that shack of theirs," declared Cara. "They ran out, that is the boy did when he saw Dud's car, but quick as he saw *you* were not in it, he turned and raced back, shut the funny old door with a bang, and pulled down the shades with the pictures on them. You would have thought we were the wicked old landlord going to turn them out for their rent," concluded Cara, innocently.

"But why did Dud drive up there? He heard me tell Nicky we wouldn't bother them," faltered the anxious Barbara.

"Why shouldn't he? It's a public place. But Babs," said Cara, suddenly noticing the effect of her words, "what's the matter? Was there a reason why we shouldn't have gone there?"

"Oh, no, of course not. I just hated to

frighten those children," Babs answered as lightly as she could. "You know how much excitement a fancy looking car still creates in that sort of district. About like an ambulance," she finished laughing a little, with evident effort.

"Worse. The children were like bees around us. I never knew what slumming in my own town could amount to," said Cara. "But Babs, aren't you going to be a lamb and wear some of my useless things for me?" She had been noticing the untouched garments on the little clothes' tree, and now ventured the question.

"Oh yes, of course I am, and thank you loads, Cara," replied Barbara impulsively. "But just this evening I felt I might be better understood if I wore—the common garden variety." In this speech Barbara had to tactfully refuse to wear the loaned garments.

"That's a real sweet little dress and looks lovely on you," Cara in turn declared. "As a matter of fact, Babs, we can't always buy that charming simplicity. It's just perfect and makes *you* stand out instead of hiding you."

"No, it is not popular enough to warrant the trade making it," laughed Barbara, as they both turned to finish their dressing.

And now the worry about Nicky was superseding the more common worry about clothes.

CHAPTER IX

SUSPICIONS

THE dinner party was spoiled for Barbara. All she could think of was Nicky slamming his door in the face of those thoughtless girls who wanted to go slumming. As if the habits and homes of the poor should furnish them with amusement!

And she could imagine little Vicky jerking down the shades, the shades with the funny pictures on. But she could not quite imagine what might be the real cause of their alarm. All this seemed more than mere suspicion of those in the more agreeable walks of life.

Cara's family had given her the exclusive use of the big dining-room for her party, and not even Dudley was present at dinner. The girls would, no doubt, have been delighted to have had a few boys present, but Cara had other ideas. She would give the first meal to the girls as they do it at college, except, of course, that the college menu could in no way compare to the Billows.

Two waitresses glided about attending to, and even anticipating, the girls' slightest wish, and Barbara was glad to feel at home amid their ministrations.

"Not a question of clothes now," she prompted herself, noticing more than one of the girls were showing some nervousness.

Cara easily led the conversation, but Louise and Esther would revert to the slumming party. That seemed to them to be the real event of the day.

"Babs, you should have been along," said Louise, a little pointedly "I know you just *love* that little Italian."

"But Nicky was really hurt this afternoon," Babs contended. "I can't see how you forgot that. They are human, just as we are, and his folks probably were just as alarmed about his cut arm as ours might have been. Arms and cuts run about the same, I should think," she said sharply.

"Oh, those people don't mind cuts," flung back Esther Deane disdainfully, and in total disregard of the impropriety of talking of "cuts" at a dinner table. "They just flourish knives the way some people point their fingers."

"Esther!" exclaimed Cara, in unassumed surprise. "You really mustn't speak so of——"

"Babs' pets," interrupted Ruth Harrison, who was the one girl who could say a thing like that unintentionally. She did not mean to hurt Babs, but the whole conversation was hurting her. She resented the girls' sneering at the children whom she had become fond of through sympathy. Also she felt like something of an outcast herself, for she did not belong to this indifferent leisure class. She had been working and earning money for two years outside of school-time, even if it were such work as might be termed professional.

"Nicky sells junk and we sell bugs," she had reminded her father, when he too had objected to her interest in the Italians.

"But you'll find they are hiding black-handers in that shack," persisted Ruth, who would not look Cara's way and therefore could not see the warnings she was flashing from her eyes at her.

It had been a wonderful dinner, from the ruby bouillon to the snowy sherbert, but to Babs the food was merely incidental. She was annoyed, mad she would call it. Why had Dudley taken the girls over the railroad when there were endless other beautiful drives to be enjoyed?

The noisy arrival of a car load of boys, including Dudley and Dick Landers who had dined at the Club, cut short the girls' dinner—which was a real charity, for the meal had been dragging along like a box-party picnic.

"We're all going to the movies," Cara announced. "That may not be a very original way to spend a house-party evening, but there's a wonderful picture at the Ritz and the boys will take us."

"Great!" gurgled Lida Bent. She hadn't said much all during dinner, and one might have suspected she was being disappointed in Cara's party. Lida was a pretty blonde, addicted to fancy dressing, and perhaps the fact that she was so beautifully "dolled up" in pale blue with creamy lace inserts, and was wearing shaded blue stockings—the most expensive sort—and all that, might easily account for her joy when Cara imparted the glad tidings of the boys and the movies.

As they hurried from the dining-room Dudley pinched Barbara's arm. It was a signal. He wanted to speak to her.

She answered with a defiant look. He would have to explain to her why he had taken the girls to Nicky's.

"Jump in my car when you're ready," he said very quietly while she hesitated.

"Isn't Glenn here?" she asked presently. It was clear to her that she should not desert an old friend like Glenn for one so new as Dudley.

"Yes, but Cara's taking the big car and he will go with the crowd. I've got to take mine," Dudley added, as an excuse for asking Barbara. "If you want to ask another girl there's lots of room, of course." He drawled that "of course" in open mockery. Why take on another girl?

"All right," replied Barbara. "I'll ask Ruth."

Now this was the very thing she didn't want to do, because Ruth's presence would prevent her private talk with Dudley, but she was annoyed. She was ready to quarrel with Dudley. He had heard all she said to little Nicky, and he could not have helped understanding her promise *not* to go to his house.

"I suppose you're sore," the boy made a chance to say, "but it wasn't my fault."

"No? I suppose your car knew the way so well it skidded right along over the tracks."

Dudley looked at her sharply. This was a new Babs. She was sharp and bitter as a boy would have been. And scrappy.

"Oh, say!" he exclaimed, his own eyes flashing defiantly. "I told you I could explain."

"Got to go," Babs reminded him, for the other girls were actually coming down the stairs and she had not yet gone up. Also she didn't want to hear his excuse.

It seemed as if Dudley's bright-red hair always took part in his emotions. Perhaps it pricked him or tickled him, or something, for he ran his fingers through it and spoiled it so far as the part went, unmarking a beautiful straight line of curls that began at his forehead and made a border right over the top of his head. Boys hate curly hair, but girls love it—even on boys.

Babs was smiling as she left him. She liked to punish boys, and her first inclination was to "cut him," to refuse to ride with him. Only her own selfish determination to find out more about the slumming party prompted her acceptance of his invitation.

"Oh, hello there Babs," sang out a familiar voice as she was almost up the stairs.

"Hello Glenn!" she answered happily. It was so good to see Glenn; he always understood everything.

"See you later," he added, and she knew what that meant. It meant that he expected to be with her at the movie party. He surely thought she would ride out with the crowd in the big car; how could he guess Dudley had asked her to go in his?

Cara was down and alongside of Glenn before

Babs could think further. Of course, the girls had all been "crazy" to know Glenn. And he was good-looking. A little catch pinched her throat as she saw Cara hurry the boy out with her. Glenn could drive any car. No doubt he would drive Cara's. And he was——Oh, pshaw! why fuss? Of course Glenn and Cara were perfectly suited to be chums. He was charming. Perhaps Babs had never given him credit for half of his good points. But then, with her he was merely some one interested in bacteriology, while with Cara a good-looking, well-mannered boy could become a wonderful pal. She had time for palship.

But he, Glenn, was Bab's chum. They had worked and played together.

"Coming?" It was Dudley calling her.

"Just a moment—I must find Ruth." replied Babs, trying to clear her mind from its petty jealousies.

"Ruth's in the other car. But here's Dick; we'll grab him for a chaperon," proposed Dudley, just as Dick Landers swung himself over the porch rail and announced to Dud that he was making himself late and they wouldn't see the "funny-picture" if he didn't "get a move on."

Dick was another nice boy. Babs saw at a glance how brown he was, how slow and easy going he was, and she also noticed he drawled and dragged and sang his words.

"From the South," she was deciding, as Dudley introduced Dick Landers from "Geo-gia."

It was the funniest thing how Babs persistently got herself in with the boys without having any idea of leaving the girls. Here she was again with the two boys for company and no girl. Would the girls believe her when she would tell them she had expected to have Ruth along?

The big car with all the others had gone on ahead, and now Babs was following in the little roadster with Dick on one side of her and Dudley on the other. Here again she found herself perfectly at ease, just as she had with two waitresses hovering around her at the table. After all it was pleasant to be so situated.

The boys were jolly companions, each trying to outdo the other at saying smart things. They teased as boys always do, and when Babs admitted under Dud's severe fire of questions, that she did like little Italian "Kids" who sold junk, and that she was "sore" because the other girls had followed her tracks that afternoon and had gone to look for more junk; then Dick relieved the strain by telling wonderful tales about the old "junk" down "Sauth."

"Best old andirons," he insisted, "the funny old black iron stuff mostly. But of c'ose there's lots of brasses, too."

"Did the girls want to go to Nicky's to buy stuff?" Babs interrupted the Southern story to ask Dudley. "Why should they do a thing like that?"

"Oh, you know what girls are when they get a notion in their heads," he evaded. "I'll tell you about it when you're in better humor, Babs," he ended just as they pulled up to the curb to enter the motion picture theater.

Ruth came to the rescue. She left the other girls and boys—there were two boys, Glenn Gaynor and Andrew Norton—and skipped along to where Babs stood waiting.

"Heard you wanted me along, Babs," Ruth said merrily, "and I'll say I wanted to be along." She gave a significant glance with a sly chuckle at the Southern boy. "I'll bet you had a fine time."

"Yes, I just missed you," Babs interrupted her, making tight hold of Ruth's arm. "But don't escape me now. I want to ask you something."

There was no getting away from it; Babs felt more and more guilty. She could not get the picture of those frightened Italian children out of her mind, and to think that *she* had promised and that her friend should have almost immediately have done the very thing she had promised not to do. Babs had told Nicky that they would not go near his home, that they would go no further than the tracks, where he insisted upon leaving Dud's car. Then, according to the scraps of information that Babs had gleaned, the girls had deliberately gone across the tracks, down the little alley-way and for all she knew right up to Nicky's door. They had even seen the pictures on the queer paper window shades.

The party occupied almost a full row of chairs in the theater, and Ruth was next to Babs on one side with Dick next her on the other. Between every pause Babs tried to ask Ruth a question, but since talking while a film is being shown is impossibly impolite, she made little headway with obtaining an explanation.

"But what difference did it make?" Ruth blurted out. "Why shouldn't we go there?"

"Because, when Nicky got his arm hurt and we took him home," Babs whispered, "I promised we wouldn't go there again. You know his folks are awfully bitter since they took his father away."

"Oh." Ruth added no comment. She was sure to believe and understand Babs, for Ruth Harrison was neither jealous nor suspicious.

The picture was interesting enough to evoke peals of laughter from all those about her, but Babs could not center her attention upon it. When a small boy with his "tattered dog" was shown, she saw Nicky, the big pleading eyes of the screen child accusing her of betraying a child's trust.

"That's what makes it so horribly mean," she kept thinking. "He trusted *me,* and, of course, he'll think it was all my fault."

Just then Ruth nudged her, very insistently.

"Say, Babs," she whispered, "no fooling, there is something mighty queer about those Italians. I'll tell you what *I* think when I get a chance."

But the chance could not be made during scraps of such whispered conversation as the two girls were having in a crowded "movie" house.

CHAPTER X

HOW GIRLS CHOOSE CHUMS

When the girls had quite exhausted all their powers of teasing Babs for again going off with the boys—just as she knew they would—she decided to ride to the ice-cream place in the big car, and she also decided to sit in the back with all the girls.

"Take your boys," Babs told them, in imitation of their own manner. "For my part I'm just dying for a chat with you girls. Don't you realize I've hardly become acquainted yet?" This last was said in a comical mimicking way, just as if she were some one of real importance who had been so busy with a whole lot of social affairs that she really couldn't reach all the friends who were—perhaps?—pining for her attention.

"Oh, we know all about that," replied Louise. "It must be an awful bore to be so popular." Louise was not being sarcastic, just flippant this time.

"And the peasants—those bothersome Italians——" Esther Dean remarked. "Babs dear, you really should not mingle so freely with the gentry."

"The gentry? You mean the bourgeois——" broke in Ruth.

"Hey, hey!" called back Glenn Gaynor from the front seat. "What is this, anyway, a test or something? Where are we going? That's what *I* want to know." He was driving.

"We're going to Hill's, of course," answered Cara. "And if we don't go straight there we'll never find a place to sit down, to say nothing of getting a dish of ice-cream."

It was a wonderful summer evening, and behind the rose-covered lattice that so beautifully screened Hill's ice-cream tables, the girls and boys of Cara Burke's party thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Babs almost forgot little Nicky's troubles, as she laughed and chatted and "showed off" to her very best advantage, her one regret being that her father didn't happen along to the drug-store that evening to see how well she was doing.

After all it was lovely to be in a girl's world. She was surprised to find how jolly it was, so much better than being alone and thinking about "bugs," the term she usually applied to the bacteriological germs her father kept himself so busily occupied with.

"Different in one day," she thought, for Babs was sure to think. She had a habit of analyzing things within and without, and she was not deceiving herself now. All that "difference" which people would insist upon ascribing to her was no difference at all. It was merely a matter of environment. When alone with her father, with Glenn for a student-companion she was one sort of Babs, but when surrounded by happy young friends, such as were with her now, she was decidedly another sort.

"Enjoying yourself, Babs?" Cara made chance to ask. She sat at the next table with Dick and Louise and had been watching Babs.

"Wonderfully," replied Babs, smiling that Cara could have so easily divined her thoughts. But, as a matter of fact, Barbara's expression just then was easy enough to interpret. She was smiling happily all over her face.

Persons passing in and out also smiled and whispered. It was "Cara Burke's party", they might have been heard to remark, and Babs was not the only one of the party proud to be in her particular place. It was well worth while to be there.

"And I didn't want to come," Barbara secretly charged herself. "I would never have known what I missed."

When they reached home the boys delayed for a while out on the big white porch. It was then that Dudley spoke privately to Babs, after managing to get her apart from the others.

"Listen," he implored. "I've got to tell you. I know you're sore——"

"What *did* you take the girls there for?" she broke in sharply. She was referring, of course, to their slumming and the Italian children.

"But the girls were saying such crazy things about the kids," Dudley protested. "You never heard such rot."

"What—rot?"

"About some black-handers being hidden in that shack."

Barbara's mark of contempt was not quite a word—a mere suggestion of one.

"As if that nonsense should have made you forget your promise," she presently continued bitterly.

"I didn't forget it."

"No?" Again that seething scorn. Babs knew how to use her voice when she wanted to be sarcastic.

"Oh, say!" The boy was despairing of making her understand him. "Just wait until I tell you. You see, Louise or Esther, I don't know which began to—well, to suggest that little

Nicky was one of a gang. Oh, it was so silly, Babs, I just got mad and drove them over there to prove they were crazy." Dudley Burke could be just as independent as Barbara Hale.

"Did you prove it?" sarcasm again.

"I tell you, honestly, I thought I was doing a good thing. I thought we would just run over there and I'd whistle for Nicky, and when he came out I'd ask him if he had any more candlesticks for sale," Dudley explained, simply.

His distress and his sincerity broke down Babs' fighting spirit. How could *she* blame him? He had actually tried to do something to help the little Italians. He could not have guessed at her unreasonable fears.

"Oh, I know, Dud," she said more pleasantly, "and I believe you. You would not—make fun of them."

"Make fun of them? I should say not. Those youngsters are smart, and they're—well, they've got a lot of our kind of kids beat," he ended, his selection of words having nothing to do with his loyalty to the Italians.

"And I know it's queer of me to act so cut up about it," Babs admitted. "You would think that *I* were trying to hide something too."

"I wouldn't, but maybe some others would," Dud rejoined, rather hurriedly for the girls were calling them insistently.

"But say, Dud," Babs began again, "did the children really act suspicious?"

"I should say they did. The way they snapped those old shades down. It's a wonder they didn't pull them off their springs."

"I didn't suppose they were more than just timid," Babs continued. "You know how foreigners are. They have an idea the whole world is their enemy, I guess."

"Not youngsters who go to American schools; they know better. No, Babs, I don't believe it was just scare, it was alarm. They were afraid we would go to the door, although they slammed it good and hard, you just bet," Dudley declared emphatically.

"But others must go there——"

"They stick by their own kind though, clannish, I mean," the boy explained. "If there really was something to hide in that house I'll bet the whole neighborhood would help them to hide it."

"But what could it be?"

"Haven't an idea. But, of course, Nicky will come around again. He'll count me a good customer for his junk." Dud laughed outright at the idea.

"And here we have been getting the girls after us again," laughed Babs in her turn. "Isn't it dreadful the way I've been running off with you today? I'll never hear the end of it."

"Good thing to give them something to gab about," Dud flung over his shoulder as the girls and boys flocked around them, pretending all sorts of punishment for their delay in joining in the general fun.

Dudley was so nice, Babs had to admit later, when quiet was descending upon the Burke household.

"Just as nice as Glenn," she reasoned, "but perhaps all boys were almost as nice when they had had such chances of refinement and environment."

And the girls? Still a little stubborn on that point, Babs was not willing to pay her own sex such a sweeping compliment. The girls were "nice" of course, much nicer than she had ever given them credit for being, but they were "show-offs" just the same. If they hadn't been they would never have gone down into the Italian district.

And if Esther and Louise were not always picking flaws in folks' affairs they wouldn't have told and retold the silly stories about poor Nicky's father, who was locked up in jail. The idea of even suspecting that he might have escaped and might be in hiding there, was absurd. As if his house would not have been searched, had he escaped. And who ever said he had escaped, anyhow?

Cara was returning from her bathroom now and she was wearing the loveliest yellow silk gown. It had little flutings of blue ribbons and there were blue-birds embroidered on it, just as if they had flown there.

Babs had not yet undressed, but the sight of Cara recalled her own robe—the hideous black cloth college gown! However could she take that out? How explain her idea of the dormitory masquerade? How could she make a joke of it, anyway?

"I left some robes in the rooms," Cara said indifferently. "I thought the girls would hardly bring any, just around the corner." This was Cara's way of doing kindness without display.

And this was Barbara's chance to mention the college gown. She hesitated. Pride was stronger than reason with her, and she didn't know that all her boasted frankness about her humble place in life, about her home-made clothes, her own-made hats, her preference for study instead of for play—all this was merely humoring her pride. And yet it had been brave of her to accept and make the most of her position. Thousands of girls might consider her "well off," and very fortunate because, compared to themselves, she was fortunate. Compared to Cara Burke she was *poor*. Of course it was all merely a matter of what one compared with.

Barbara watched Cara brush her hair. It was bobbed, of course, but lovely and glossy, crow black, and it encased Cara's head like a sculptured cap.

"Your hair is lovely," Babs said as she watched her. "Aren't you dreadfully tired of curls?"

"Well, since I've never had any I suppose I'm not really tired of them, but I do think the boys have the best of us in the matter of hair styles." She paused in her brushing to make a better part. "If we just got used to ourselves fixed up more simply I suppose we would like ourselves quite as well."

"Surely we would," chimed in Babs. "It's only training. Our eyes expect certain effects and we feel we must humor our eyes."

Cara laid her brush down on the dressing table and swung around to face Barbara.

"You know an awful lot, don't you Babs?" she said. Her tone was filled with admiration.

"Why, no I don't, Cara. About lots of things I am terribly—ignorant."

"I mean in your way of thinking things out. Dud says you're as smart as a boy, and that from Dud is—something!"

Babs laughed. "To be as smart as a boy, as smart as some boys wouldn't mean a lot; would it, Cara?" she countered.

"No. But *he* meant, of course, as smart as a smart boy——"

"Smarter than a smart boy?"

"Just let's call it smart," suggested Cara, but there was a seriousness about her manner that did not chime in with her words. Cara Burke was evidently trying to understand Barbara Hale.

Barbara was merely beginning to undress. She had never been so poky. She felt very unreal. All, or at least most of the things, she had planned to do she wasn't doing, and she hated to change her mind. Pride again ruled her, for in the "making up of her mind" to anything, Barbara was what would be commonly called stubborn. She didn't call it that; she considered it weak and foolish to be changeable. All of which must be explained to explain Barbara.

"But, just the same," Cara continued speaking after a short pause, "*you* are smart."

Barbara sighed. "Cara," she sort of whispered for she was feeling queer, "I'm not really. Because I do things I am called upon to do I may seem different. But it isn't that. It's just because I am differently situated."

Cara jumped up and coming over to where Barbara was sitting, on one of the ivory twin beds, threw her arms around her.

"We're going to be chums, aren't we, Babs?" she said warmly. "You may not admit you're smart, but I think you are, and I've always longed to be chums with a girl like you."

"Like me?" Barbara could feel her face burn. She was not at all what this lovely, simple-minded, frankly honest girl was thinking her to be. She wasn't smart, she wasn't different, she wasn't "high-brow," she was only a poser, one who was pretending. "Cara, I'm afraid you are going to be dreadfully disappointed in me," she managed to say finally. "I'm not really anything but plain stubborn."

"Babs!" exclaimed Cara, bestowing upon her more and more girlish admiration. "Do you know I planned this little party just to get acquainted with you?"

"You didn't, really!"

"Yes I did," pursued the girl in that golden robe. "I even bet with Dud that I could get you to come."

"And now that you've got me here, what have I brought you?" Babs' deep-blue eyes were as soft as velvet violets, as she, in turn, gazed lovingly at Cara Burke.

"Oh, a lot. You couldn't understand, of course, Babs, but you must have noticed how jealous all the other girls were. I'm sure they have been talking about it all night or they would have been at our door. Here they come now."

And at the unmistakable sounds of suppressed merry-making (it was almost midnight) Babs jumped up, and without giving herself a second for any silly consideration, she got into the black cap and gown.

The girls were knocking at the door.

CHAPTER XI

THE MIDNIGHT RIDE

CARA had scurried off and Babs was hiding behind the door, as she opened it. Giggling and spluttering in their hilarity they tumbled in, the Indian girl, in full regalia, leading the raid.

"Ee-yah! Gum-bow-wah, Minne-ha-ha, See-la," chanted the one posing as the Indian. She was Ruth Harrison, of course, for it was Ruth who had so quickly decided upon the masquerade when she met the girls that afternoon. She hadn't remembered about a pretty robe, so she turned the matter into a joke. This was the result of it.

"Approach, Daughter of the Sun," spoke Barbara, stepping out from her hiding and assuming the pose of a very majestic Portia.

"Oh, how stunning! Barbara! Are you really a college girl?" exclaimed Louise, surprised and awed at the spectacle in a genuine college cap and gown. Barbara did indeed look like a young college girl, and her dignified personality seeming to add inches to her classic height as she stood before them.

"Wonderful!" Esther chimed in, while Lida seemed spellbound. Ruth, the erstwhile Indian maiden, went stamping around, uttering guttural sounds more like grunts and groans, however, than like anything Indian. Lida, in her heavenly blue, chosen to suit her pale blondness, was scarcely more noticeable than an unlighted candle, as she stood by. But on the whole the girls in their much-talked-of "robes" made quite a little chorus.

"Where's Cara?" some one asked while the group lined up in mock ballet fashion.

"Yes, where is she?" pressed Louise. They seemed to be expecting something interesting from Cara.

"She was here a minute ago," Babs replied.

Just then the door opened again and in walked —a bride!

"Oh, how lovely. How wonderful!"

After the first burst of admiration they all stood around speechless, for Cara was gowned in the full bridal outfit of a very old-fashioned style, the skirt of her "silk muslin" dress standing out as if it were very stiffly starched (but it was the sort of organdie that held it so)—and her waist!

"How in the world did you get into it?" asked Lida.

"I didn't—Lottie put me into it. She has taken care of the chest that has held this make-up for years. It was my grandmother's," Cara told her guests proudly, pirouetting around to show off to better advantage.

"But the veil?" Louise was fingering the tulle mesh that floated from Cara's black head. How she held it in over her "bob" was rather mysterious.

"Grandmother's also," Cara told the admiring girls. "Aren't these little sleeves sweet?"

Up to this time Cara had not seen Babs in the college costume, nor had she seen Ruth in the Indian outfit, for these two particular stars had managed to keep in the background while the bride was being inspected. But she espied them both now! And she fairly gasped in astonishment.

"How ever did you do it?" she demanded. "I thought I had the original masquerade idea."

"Ideas go in flocks," laughed Babs. "Why don't you cheer for our Alma Mater?"

"Oh, girls!" breathed Esther. "Aren't we dreadful? It must be past midnight and we certainly aren't whispering."

"No need to," replied Cara in full voice. "We have this end of the house to ourselves and we're having a party. But do let me see you, Babs, a real, honest-to-goodness cap and gown! Any one can be a bride——"

"I don't know about that," interrupted Louise. "We would have to have a man to be a bride——"

"Oh, Weasy! How literal! I mean this sort of bride, of course," insisted Cara, sailing around so that her veil flew out in a lovely silken cloud.

"Oh, let's have a show!" proposed Ruth. "I'll be—who'll I be?" she floundered, feeling a little uncertain on her Indian lore.

"Ruth Harrison! That Indian robe is just too darling!" cooed Cara. "And your feathers! I think you girls were mighty smart to think of our midnight frolic."

"But what a pity the boys couldn't see us?" sighed Esther, about half-way in earnest.

"The boys—see you! In that butterfly thing with—you got anything under it?" asked Louise, innocently.

"Louise St. Clair!" gasped Esther, pretending to be terribly shocked. "I'd have you know I'm fully garbed," and she tossed off the pretty robe to display a still lovelier set of blue silk pajamas. Reasonably, Esther was pleased to have so good a chance to display her pretty things, for as Ruth might say "the fairies who see things while we sleep may love them, but they're awfully quiet about it."

"Let's have a march," proposed Babs. "Cara, you lead and I'll be the magistrate who is to perform the ceremony."

This was fun. The girls in the pretty robes were acting as bridesmaids, the Indian Girl was the groom, while Portia in her severe black robe (and the mortar-board cap was actually becoming to Babs) stood judiciously upon a low stool, her book in her hand statuesquely, and her face molded into an appropriate expression of severity.

In turn each of them tried to hum a march, but the time would jumble into a fox-trot or into some other undignified dance time.

"Oh, I know," exclaimed Lida. "It's 'Yes, We Have No Bananas!' Try that."

"Bananas!" squealed Louise. "March to that! Why it's wooden legged! A hop skip and jump. Lida Bent, that's the one best fox-trot."

"I thought——"

"What's that?" Ruth interrupted Lida. "I heard something."

"So did I," breathed Cara in a hushed voice. She seemed frightened suddenly, for the noise was too unmistakably close by.

"Oh! A man is—groaning!"

"Hark!"

They huddled together in a far corner away from the window that opened on a little upper porch. No one spoke. They certainly had heard a very queer noise, all of them.

"Some one is calling," Babs insisted, moving as if to answer the call.

"Calling! It's past twelve o'clock," replied Cara.

"And a storm is coming. Hear the thunder," gasped Esther, shuddering in her fright.

Again came the call; surely it was a call, but what a hoarse awful voice intoned it!

"Oh!" cried Lida in real terror, for just at that moment something had hit the window.

"Maybe Dudley and the boys are playing tricks," suggested Babs, brightly.

"No, Mother had his promise they wouldn't play any tricks, late," Cara insisted. "No, Dud would *never* throw things at the window. He knows better than to do that."

"Well, some one *is* throwing things at the window," Babs insisted, "and *I'm* going to see who it is."

"You mustn't, Babs," Louise implored the girl who had separated herself from the shrinking group and was moving towards the window.

But she did move towards it, nevertheless. "I can see the lighthouse flash its light," she declared. "I guess they're getting ready for the storm. Oh!" Babs sprang back just as something landed on the porch. It was heavier than the things thrown before, and as it crossed the window-sill the girls could see it was a stick. It almost sailed in the open window and did disarrange the soft curtains with its pointed end that rested over the sill.

"We'll have to call some one," Cara insisted, forgetting all about her bridal costume as the other girls also had forgotten how they were clothed.

"Hey there! Are ye all dead!"

A man's voice! Close at the window! So close the girls could not now feel safe to cross in front of the window to open the door to call.

"Oh, mercy!" groaned Louise. "He'll be in the room in a minute! What ever shall we do?"

"Keep still!"

"I see him——"

"Oh!" shrieked Lida. "A big black face——"

"Say there! Let me in! Are ye all dead! I'm in a hurry!" This command came through the window in a gruff, heavy voice.

"Some one wants something," Babs declared. "We had better speak to him!"

"Oh, don't please," begged Ruth, who was apparently more frightened than the others, although this was unusual for Ruth.

"We must," declared Babs. "There's no danger with all of us together."

"But he may be crazy——"

"Will you push that window up?" the voice was ordering gruffly.

And the order came from a man who now stood in clear view. His face was not pleasant—it was old and weather-beaten, and he was wearing one of those queer hats known as S'ou'-westers.

"Looks like a fisherman," Cara said more confidently.

But a sudden thrusting up of the window-pane no longer left time for speculation. The next moment the girls gazed amazedly at an old man in the garb of a seaman, and Babs, at least, instantly recognized him as Davy Quiller, the lighthouse keeper.

"Davy!" she gasped. "What ever do you want here?"

"I want oil, lamp oil, and I've got to get it," thundered the intruder. "I knew you were up 'cause I could see you per'radin' around. And the rest of this house must be dead 'cordin' to the way they sleep. I've been a-poundin' on every winder an' door. And I couldn't wait another minute. Got any kerosene oil on these premises?"

Babs and Cara understood. The lighthouse tender had to have oil for his light, and he was justified in seeking it even under these unusual circumstances.

"I don't believe we ever use oil here," Cara spoke up. "But I'll find out," she hurried towards the door to call a servant.

"Mighty sorry to spoil your—show," the old man muttered. "But I had to get in here. I'll get right down again and wait outside. 'T'ain't any harder than walking downstairs," and he was stepping over the rail, down to the first porch with the alacrity of a much younger man. Captain Davy Quiller was "no slouch."

By now the household had been pretty well aroused, and the girls, who had merely fancy robes on, were scurrying to get into something more presentable. Cara in her bridal attire and Babs in her collegiate outfit however, seemed little concerned about their personal appearance. They sensed an emergency, and that at the lighthouse, so their search for lamp oil was added to that of Captain Quiller's. Ruth Harrison, the

Indian girl, was another who felt dressed enough for appearance on the porch, so that when the big arc light was flashed on, as most of the Burke household assembled beneath it, Babs, Cara and Ruth made a striking picture. Among those present were Dudley Burke and Dick Landers, his house guest, and of course the boys immediately set up "a howl" when they beheld "the show."

"Keep still!" ordered Cara severely. "Don't be silly. We've got to get oil. Captain Quiller, where do they keep oil around here?" she asked competently.

"That's just it, they don't," the seaman replied. "Of course I always get my supply from the station, but something went wrong with their delivery this week. I thought I had plenty for a couple of more nights, mistook an empty for a full can—but this afternoon I found out my blunder," he admitted, "and I have a little fellow runs messages for me. I'd trust him with my hat," the captain declared firmly, his hat being a very important possession of his, "I can't see what happened to him! Well, I must be a-running," he wound up, turning to leave.

"We'll take you around in the car," Dudley promptly offered. "Just you wait a minute, 'till I—hitch up."

"I suppose it would be quicker," admitted the captain. "But you see that storm a'comin'?" he asked Mr. Burke, as if the gentleman of the house was entitled to some attention.

"Yes; looks like a hummer," Mr. Burke replied.

"An' it's blacker out there," pointing toward the sea, "than 't'is in here," the captain declared. "'An my light's the Eye of the Lord to the sailors," he said, lowering his voice reverently.

Dudley had hurried off for the car but Dick tarried on the porch, joking with the girls about their "show", that they hadn't invited the boys to see. Babs and Cara were standing aside with the grown-ups.

"We can go along," Cara said quietly to Babs.

"But how about the other girls?" Babs inquired.

"They wouldn't want to go, but, of course, I'll ask them," Cara replied, and she did so promptly.

"No, I guess not," Louise answered. "Looks as if the storm was almost here and *I'm* scared to death of thunder-storms."

So were Lida and Esther, they said, but Ruth agreed to go with Cara and Babs, so it happened that those most fantastically attired piled into the touring car, after Captain Quiller.

Babs, being almost fully dressed, just went along in the college robe, at Cara's suggestion, and Cara actually kept on the bridal dress, because she declared it was too much trouble to get it off, merely throwing a light cape over her shoulders and tossing the bridal veil at Louise as she dashed off. The veil rested comically over Louise's head and gave the girls on the porch something to joke about as those in the car rumbled off.

"I sense an adventure," predicted Babs, hopefully. "It seems to me, Cara, you should remember your house party."

"And call it 'The Midnight Race for Lighthouse Oil.' I will," agreed Cara, while Dudley and the seaman discussed the problem of finding oil at that hour of the night.

Then a vivid flash of lightning followed by a splitting clap of thunder silenced them all.

CHAPTER XII

DUMPED BUT NOT DISCOURAGED

THE blackness of the night made the lightning flashes all the more terrifying. Dudley took a firm grip on his steering wheel, while the girls shuddered.

"Pretty slick lightnin'," muttered Captain Quiller, "an' my light hasn't oil enough to keep her goin' long."

"And you think you can get it over at the little Italian store?" Dudley asked. "How in the world can we expect to wake the store man up? I imagine an Italian store-keeper might be a pretty good sleeper."

"Might at that," agreed the captain. "But we sailors have to trust an awful lot to luck. Somethin's sure to turn up. Ain't no countin' on what it'll be."

Flash after flash of lightning slashed through the blackness. Cara, as the olden time bride, and Babs as the collegian, holding between them the frightened Indian girl, Ruth—as if an Indian girl ever would be frightened of a thunder-storm—clung more closely to one another in real fear. Suddenly Babs jerked aside from the others. The car was scarcely moving along a narrow turn and she clutched Cara's arm excitedly.

"I see a light in those bushes!" she exclaimed. "Look! Over there by that white birch tree!"

The headlights of the big car threw out such a glare that it was easy enough to distinguish objects along the way. Dudley slowed his car down as Babs cried out.

"Yes, that's somethin'. Mebby some 'un' hurt," the captain suggested.

"Hey! Hey!" came a shrill call. "Over here, by the ditch!"

"That's a boy," declared Dudley promptly.

"Yes, and it sounds like *our* boy," added Babs, already on the car step ready to go in search of who ever was calling.

"You mean——"

"I mean Nicky. Hey! That you Nicky!" She called out loudly, for thunder claps still continued to roar through the night with terrifying frequency.

"Ye-ah!" came the answer. "That's me! I'm—I'm stuck!"

Even the bride in her white silk muslin gown, over which a flying cape did very little to protect it from the rain, ran towards the eye of light in the blackness and the clue of direction given by the boy's voice.

"Look out for deep cuts," the captain warned them. He, of course, was armed with his unfailing lantern, and as he warned the others he swept the light on their uncertain path.

"Oh!" Ruth cried out, "I've lost my moccasin!"

"Moccasin!" repeated Dudley. "How could you expect to keep those things on?"

"I didn't expect to. I knew I'd lose them," replied Ruth undaunted. "I've got to go back to the car. This is too muddy for my poor feet."

"All right," Cara agreed. "You can make it and we won't be far away. We've got to get to the boy quickly."

As a matter of fact, Babs was almost there. She had trudged on ahead, breathless to reach the boy who, she felt, must again have met with an accident. No boy, especially Nicky, would be in such a plight if he had not been disabled.

"Here, over here," the boy called again. "Can you see my light?"

"Yes, we're coming. Hold your horses," called back Dudley, for they were almost up to the spot from which a bull's eye light could be seen through the undergrowth.

Then they found him. The poor little chap!

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" exclaimed the captain.

"I couldn't get there with your oil, Cap," sighed the boy. "I lost me way, and—look at me!"

They did, all of them. Under the gleam of the captain's light they looked at him.

"Poor little chap!" repeated Babs. She was the first to recover her composure sufficiently to begin at the bushes. She was trying to tear them away from the crouched little figure.

Presently all of them, including the captain, were at those bushes, tearing, pulling, breaking, until the tangle was cleared away.

"An' ye tried to get me the oil, Nick," the captain said, as he put his big friendly hand out to the boy. "I knew you would."

"Yeh, and I would have too, only fer me busted arm," Nicky proclaimed stoutly scrambling to his feet.

"You were trying to ride that old wheel, hold a heavy can of oil and find your way in this storm," Dudley reasoned astoundedly. "It's a wonder you even have your voice left," he concluded as a big boy would.

"'Bout all," Captain Quiller added. "A youngster like Nicky ain't got no special fightin' force to boast of, only his spirit. He's got the spunk, ain't you Nick?"

"Oh, that ain't nawthin'," depreciated the boy, from whose clothing Babs and Cara were still dragging bits of briars and dried sticks. "Don't spill the oil," he protested, for the old bicycle was prone against the oil can and the least movement of it might spill the precious fluid.

"We got to hustle at that," Captain Quiller reminded them. "I kin see the light a-goin' an' the storm's about spent. But ole Pete'll be in a canipshun fit. He figgered he jest about knowed I couldn't get any oil an' we'd be out o' luck then," he admitted dryly.

"But you have got it," Barbara said proudly. She was holding up the can in proof.

"I'll get the car," Dudley said. "See, here's a pretty good road around the jungle. I'll be back in a jiff."

"What a wonderful little boy!" Cara took time now to exclaim. She was now beginning to understand what it was that Barbara so greatly admired in the little Italian. Captain Quiller had called it spunk.

"I'd have got there," said Nicky stoutly, half apologizing for his predicament, "if my light didn't go on the blink. Fer jest a minute it danced. An' that was when I took this header."

Ruth had been shouting all sorts of questions from the car but no one had time to answer her. Now she was coming along with Dudley. As the strong headlights of the big car caught the group standing waiting a remarkable picture was presented.

"Oh," squealed Ruth to Dudley. "Just look!"

There stood Cara in the white dress, which shone plainly beneath the cape, Nicky next with his bandaged arm and tattered clothing, his black hair making streaks on his forehead and seeming to hide so much of his small face. On the other side of him, and insisting on holding on to him was Babs in her college gown, and somehow still managing to keep on her head that ridiculous mortar-board cap. Of course it was fitting on her bobbed head pretty closely. And Captain Quiller was actually standing just back of them, his lantern held high above their heads. The can of oil securely held in the other hand could not be seen but he knew it was there and he had a "strangle hold" on it.

No wonder Ruth exclaimed at the picture. It was fit for a "movie set" with unlimited possibilities in the subtitle.

But the lighthouse tender was impatient to be off with the oil for his lamp, and it took all of them but a few minutes to get into the car, while Dudley then expertly drove through the uncertain roads made more uncertain by the ravages of the heavy summer shower.

A tantalizing drizzle kept up and the night was still bitterly black, but Nicky was safe in the car now, Captain Quiller had his oil and the girls had had their adventure.

Babs was so glad to have been in the rescuing party.

"Whatever would you have done," she asked Nicky, "if we had not found you?"

"Some one would of," the boy replied with the supreme confidence of his years.

"But you were hurt, again," Cara comforted. "You've had an awful lot of bad luck today, Nickolas, haven't you?"

"Not so much," he answered. He was alive after all, and that seemed good luck to Nicky.

"What's hurt worst this time?" Dudley made a chance to call back.

"Nothin'," Nicky said, as Dudley knew he would.

"But you got a spill in the ditch?"

"Sure."

"And you couldn't get out?"

"Nope."

"Then what held you down?"

"Me ankle. It got twisted I guess," Nicky reluctantly admitted.

"Does your ankle hurt?" asked Babs, solicitously.

"Not much it don't. It's gettin' better."

"But you didn't spill my oil, son," Captain Quiller assured him proudly. "I knowed you wouldn't. Ain't never failed me yet, Nick, you haven't. An' if you was older——"

"If he was older!" It was Babs who repeated the phrase. A sudden vision swept before her. The light, the harbor light belonged to the government. Nicky had risked his life to bring oil to the lighthouse keeper! And Nicky so badly needed government influence, for his father!

"Oh, Captain!" she gasped. "Isn't Nicky really a hero?"

"Bettcher life he is!" replied the captain.

"And heroes get recognition from—from the government—don't they?" She could hardly speak coherently, she was so excited.

"Sometimes, sometimes," said Captain Quiller. "But here we are, and here's Pete a-waitin'. Here you are Pete!" he called out lustily as they drew up in the heavy sand to reach the lighthouse landing. "Here's you oil. Needin' it bad, ain't yer?"

"She's jest a-flickerin'," called back Pete. " 'Bout ready to flicker out too. Where's your can?"

"Right here. There you be," declared the captain, handing out the oil can. "An' if it hadn't been for friend Nicky, we'd never have got it, neither."

But Pete had grasped the handle of the oil can and was going towards the tower, without showing the least interest in what Captain Quiller was saying. All he wanted was the oil and he had got that.

The lighthouse was one of those built upon land—upon a strip of land that extended into the sea like a peninsula. On the end of this strip a tower was built of lattice work construction, and from the top of this tower The Light could be seen far enough out at sea to save mariners from the sand strips that would easily ground their craft.

"No use invitin' you in jest now, I suppose," Captain Quiller remarked politely, "and I suppose you're goin' to take young Nick home, ain't y'u?"

"Certainly we are," both Cara and Babs exclaimed. Then Babs said with a little laugh. "We've been taking Nicky home *all* day, it seems to me."

But the boy was tugging at her arm, and she guessed why.

"Those others," the little fellow muttered, "they came this afternoon."

"I know," whispered Babs, "but it's all right, they were just driving around——"

"Our way?" He couldn't believe that. His voice said so.

"We were looking for candle-sticks," Cara chimed in. "Like those you sold to my brother."

"I can get more," answered Nicky brightly. Evidently the lure of selling the trinkets was enough to restore his confidence in Babs' friends.

"Yes," gushed Cara, taking advantage of the opportunity to cheer him up, and likewise to cheer Babs, "we want a lot of odd things and perhaps you can get them for us," she suggested happily.

"I could," declared Nicky. And now Babs knew that he no longer blamed her. He was just thinking of selling things and could not be thinking of her breach of his confidence.

She wanted so much to throw her arms around him and just squeeze love into his starved little childhood. She wanted to shout out in that dark night that he had risked his life to get oil for the lighthouse, she wanted to comfort that hurt little foot, even to fondle that injured hand—oh, if only she could do all or any of this!

But instead she must sit there quietly as the car rolled along, and perhaps Nicky would insist again on being let down "this side of the track."

"Whatever are you sighing for, Babs?" Ruth asked in astonishment. "Are you sick—or something?"

"Oh no: was I sighing?"

"Yep, you was," came so unexpectedly from little Nicky that everyone laughed.

"That's right, Nick," said Dudley, "we fellows have got to stick together. So I'll dump the girls at home and we'll finish our ride in peace."

"Sure," agreed Nicky, and again a problem was solved.

CHAPTER XIII

CRAZY QUILTS GALORE

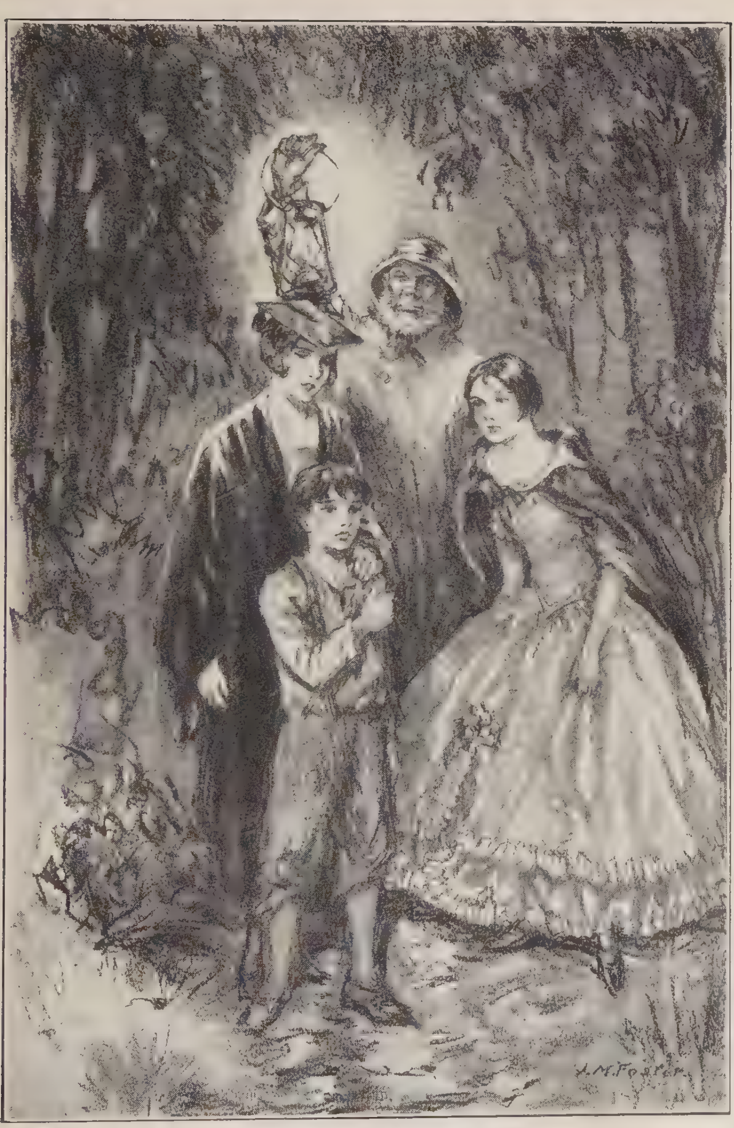
THE party was over. It had been a delightful experience for Babs, and despite her natural opposition to that social life to which she felt alien, she had to admit that it "did her good."

She admitted this at the constant reiteration of Dora, who just kept saying that the party "done Barbara good," until Barbara chimed in to break the monotony.

"Put some life in her," then Dora varied her chant, and at that Dr. Hale took up the refrain and declared that it certainly had.

But life at the old-fashioned home did not now seem quite the same to Barbara. Everything seemed so shabby; she scarcely felt brave enough to invite her new friends in to see her, although their curiosity would amply have repaid her and would easily have compensated for the lack of luxury.

"Not just yet," Babs replied to her father's suggestion. "Wait until I get things fixed up a little."



"I SUPPOSE YOU'RE GOIN' TO TAKE NICK HOME, AIN'T Y'U?" CAPTAIN QUILLER REMARKED.

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But a new interest was now claiming the time and attention of Sea Cosset folks. A real Old Home Week was being inaugurated, and Babs was asked to head the girls' committee.

"Because," said Miss Mary-Louise Trainor, "she knows something. She takes more books out of the library than any other girl in the place." Miss Trainor told the women's committee that and so Babs had been asked. She could not refuse; her father pointed out the fact to her, that because the Hales were a part of the sea-coast town, and living "over the line in Landing" did not make her exempt from obligation to help with this affair. She was a native, one who lived there winter and summer, and what did the summer girls know about Old Home Week anyhow?

So Babs had reluctantly consented with reservations. She wouldn't boss anybody and she wouldn't work at night. She wanted her evenings to do as she pleased with them, and if the "show" was to hold forth of nights the women would have to "tend it," she pointed out, reasonably enough.

The old Stillwell place was selected for the exhibit, as quaint an old homestead as could be found in the entire county. Then the women's committee decided that all sorts of old-time handiwork would be taken in the collection, and that meant that quilts were going to receive a tremendous boom.

All one could hear was "quilts"; every one seemed to have a collection of at least one, and those who didn't own one knew just where they could borrow one. So a quilt deluge was threatened.

Candlesticks were probably next in point of popularity, and Barbara knew something about them. She knew that Nicky could supply a pair, beautifully carved in new or old wood, for he had done so when Cara offered him her patronage. Who carved them or where he got them was as mysterious to Babs as to the other girls, and boys too, for that matter, for Babs had insisted upon leaving the Italians to themselves.

"If we want to try their candlesticks, all right," she said simply but finally. "I don't see what business it is of ours *where* they get them from."

"Neither do I," agreed Cara stoutly, "for we know very well they don't steal them. Who would have things like that anyway? They have simply been made to fill our order," she concluded sagely.

This was all settled shortly after the windup of the house party. Then little Nicky had taken Cara's order, and the delivery of the quaintly carved wooden candlesticks, tinted with softly blended colors that reminded one of the Italian painters, was made within an incredibly short time.

Even Babs marvelled at the workmanship. It was too fine to be made by some unskilled Italian, and when she tactfully asked Nicky who did make them, he became so excited he could scarcely answer.

"A friend," was all he said. Babs knew better than to press her question. Cara declared frankly she didn't care who made them, she was so glad to get them.

"Even if that famous black-hander whom the girls are always hinting about, is hidden in the Marcusi shack," she protested stoutly, "I don't give a rap. The candlesticks are the quaintest things I've ever seen and I'll give Nicky all the orders he'll take for more. I want them for Christmas presents," declared Cara.

Cara and Babs were alone on the beach. The morning was hot and sultry and only a few vagrant clouds gave hope of stirring up a breeze of relief. The girls had already become chums, as Cara had intended and perhaps as Babs had feared—because she considered herslf too busy to have a real chum. At least, she thought she felt that way about it.

But she very soon discovered what a foolish notion that was, for a girl like Cara helped her. She did exactly what Dora said she would do—"put some life in Barbara."

And now that they were really companions, Babs just wondered how she used to get along, all alone or with Glenn Gaynor. Glenn too had changed his habits, and was having a wonderful time going around with Dudley Burke.

"Hope it doesn't rain," Cara remarked as the girls made for their bath-houses. "Because you know, Babs, this afternoon——"

"Oh, yes, I know. We're to have a tiresome old meeting," grumbled Babs. "Why do old ladies so *love* to get things up for *young* ladies? Why can't they manage their own old patch-work show?"

"They can, dear," cooed Cara. "But then they'd miss the fun of making *us* do something. That's their chiefest joy, you know," she ended laughingly.

"Yes, I know. Well, I'm only doing what I have to do because I have to," Babs declared, still in a grumbling mood. "Dads again, you know."

"And Nicky," Cara reminded her companion. "You know, Babbsy, you *must* show Nicky's candlesticks."

"No, I don't think I will," Babs surprised he friend by saying. "Women aren't like us. They would demand to know who made them, and that would, or might," she corrected herself, "bring trouble to Nicky."

"Oh, Babs!" exclaimed Cara, in real surprise. "You don't mean to say you wouldn't. Not show those darling little candlesticks," she repeated. "Why, they would be sure to win a prize," Cara faltered in disappointment.

"I know they are lovely and I don't suppose any handicraft work there will be better done," Babs replied. "But somehow, Cara, I know those poor folks are trying to hide some trouble. And I'd be a queer friend if I drew attention to it."

"Attention—to what?"

"To the Unknown."

"Unknown?"

"Yes. We know perfectly well that whoever makes those candlesticks is hiding—is unknown," Barbara admitted. "I'd love to know all about them but it really isn't my business, is it?" she said rather than asked.

"Do you really believe, Babs, that a mysterious person is being hidden by—by Nicky's mother?" Cara almost gasped.

"Yes, I do," replied Babs decidedly.

"It couldn't be—be their father!"

"I don't see how he could have escaped and then hide there," Barbara continued, as if trying to reason the matter out. "That would be too easy."

"Yes, wouldn't it?" agreed Cara. "And—the carving is really very fine. Mother has seen much of that work. She travelled all over Europe last year to finish up her sight-seeing, you know," Cara made clear.

"Yes?" Babs answered abstractedly. She was not thinking of sight-seeing or Europe either.

"And she says," continued the enthused Cara, "that this Italian work is really very good indeed."

"Dad says so too. But I must hurry to dress," Babs reminded herself. "No matter how we feel about the old ladies quilting bee, I suppose we've got to show up, much as we hate to."

At this the girls separated, as their bath-houses were at different ends of the small pavilion, but when each emerged, dressed and ready to ride home in the small car that Cara had just obtained a license to drive, their conversation was resumed.

"You see," Barbara pointed out, " how dreadful it would be if anything that we did would draw attention to this thing. I just couldn't stand that."

"But how could little Nicky come to harm?" Cara wanted to know. "He surely is innocent, and besides, isn't something going to be done to reward him for risking his life to get oil to the lighthouse?"

"I hope so. I have written to Washington; Dad told me how to do it. But I suppose they get so many such letters I may never get a reply," said Babs, a little dispiritedly.

"I don't see why not!" Cara never could see why any one would slight Barbara. "I'm sure we pay enough taxes to have a secretary answer such letters," she fumed, indignantly.

"Oh, I suppose I'll get a letter-form answer, maybe, the kind they grind out of machines, you know. But it would be lovely——" Babs stopped, made a queer face and choked back a laugh.

"A secret, eh?" surmised Cara. "Not even telling me?"

"I don't want to seem silly, Cara, so if you don't mind I'll wait to tell you *when* I get my official answer. *When* I do," she repeated, quizzically.

"Want Nicky made official messenger to the president, or something like that?" Cara started in to guess.

"No fair guessing," Babs checked her. "And besides, perhaps I shouldn't have written at all. Who am *I*, to address the Secretary of State."

"You are just as important as any one else, I guess," Cara defended promptly.

"But Captain Quiller is in the government employ, and Nicky got the oil for *him,*" Babs reminded her.

"Yes, maybe all that's true, but Captain Quiller doesn't love Nicky as you do."

"He does, really Cara. He came over to see Dad right after it all happened, and what he didn't say in praise of Nicky merely stuck in his throat. He just raved about him."

"Then why don't you take a chance to show off his candlesticks and get the women raving too?"

"Oh, women!" deplored Babs. "They want to know everything. I wouldn't wonder but they would go right down among the Italians and offer to give them lessons in making macaroni. They couldn't imagine the foreign women knowing anything, I suppose. No Cara, please don't say anything about it. I'll have to wait and see how things turn out. I can't, just can't take a chance on hurting poor little Nicky and Vicky."

"All right, girl," Cara answered gaily. "Here you are," and she pulled up expertly to the side steps of Babs' old homestead. "See you later. I'll call——"

"Dad will be driving out, thanks Cara," Barbara interrupted her in her offer. "We have to go out in the family car once in a while you know, or folks might think we pawned it," she finished, trying to joke about the old car that Dr. Hale drove around in. It went, and that was all that he could ask of any car, according to him.

Later that day these same two girls entered enthusiastically into the plans for the exhibit. No one could have guessed they were not "heart and soul with the project" which was the way Miss Mary-Louise Trainor said every one ought to be for establishing a Community House.

"Might as well have some fun out of it," Cara told Barbara.

"Might better," Barbara agreed with Cara.

"But the crazy quilts; are we supposed to go crazy over them? Aren't they hideous?"

"We're apt to go crazy over them," Barbara continued in the same bantering strain. "Ought to call this a Crazy Show."

"Judging from the way some of the women are acting," Cara whispered, for the girls were busy sorting the goods arriving, "we'll be lucky if it doesn't turn out to be a prize-fight."

"That would be fun; let us hope for it. I heard Mrs. Trout tell Mrs. Clayton that her quilt would have to be shown on the old table over there."

"And that's the family table of the Brownell's, older than Age itself, I believe," Cara continued to whisper. "I doubt if they'll allow any quilt upon its sacred surface."

"That's why we may hope for a prize-fight," said Barbara, hurrying to the door to take from the hands of Mrs. Mary Ann Smalley a glass case of utterly impossible wax flowers.

A flock of girls, all on the girls' committee, and expected to work under the directions of Cara and Barbara, arrived just in time.

"We don't dare put the wax flowers on the floor," said Cara to Esther, "but where can we put them?"

"Better get a carpenter to make a long table for us——"

"My flowers must have a proper setting," Mrs. Mary Ann Smalley interrupted Cara. "That table over there——"

"That's the famous Brownell table," Cara said, smiling that this one table with its elaborate carvings should be in such great demand.

"Well, I don't care whose it is, it's just made for my wax flowers," insisted the excited exhibitor, just as Mrs. Nathaniel Brownell herself fluttered in.

Then, as Babs put it, the fight was on.

CHAPTER XIV

A HONEYSUCKLE SECRET

"I DON'T see why not," panted Mrs. Smalley to Mrs. Brownell. She was holding in her trembling hands the huge glass case of waxed passion flowers, and every time the case shook even a little in her trembling hands, the flowers would shed a few hunks of wax. It was so very old, you see, and wax is wax.

"The reason why I don't wish anything placed upon *our* table," replied the elegant Mrs. Brownell, using all her social powers in an effort to appear polite, "is because of the exquisite grain of the wood. Just look at that," she begged the excited Mrs. Smalley.

"Yes, I see," said Mrs. Smalley blindly, for she couldn't have seen over that glass case, and besides, she wasn't looking that way. "But they are both of the same period," she pointed out as if she knew.

"Same period!" gasped Mrs. Brownell. "Why!" She pronounced that "why" as if it were composed of two syllables—"why-eeh!"

And then she could hardly speak from sheer disdain. "Our table," she continued to orate, "is of the very early American period, but you know, *dear* Mrs. Smalley, wax flowers are not even classified."

"What did I tell you?" said Babs to Cara. "Here's the fight we were hoping for, right upon our heads. Ruth," she called ever so lightly, for Ruth was actually staring at the women with unhidden glee. "Ruth, will you please—do something!"

"What," drawled Ruth, her mouth staying open as if she hated to miss anything by closing it. "What can I do, Babs?" she finally managed to ask, still watching the women.

"You can grab a few things from the ladies as they enter," Babs suggested. She too was having a good time, for the table-wax-flower dispute was still going strong.

"They're actually taking sides," Cara chuckled. "There are three with Mrs. Smalley and four with Mrs. Brownell. Babs, you can't expect us to work while this is going on."

"I don't, I know better. But here comes another glass case. Looks like somebody's dead head of hair tangled up into snarls they call flowers."

"Dead head of hair!" gasped Louise.

"Yes. Don't you know they used to make flowers out of the hair of the dear, dead departed?" Babs continued, chuckling.

"Horrors!" exclaimed Louise.

"Exactly. And this is going to be a horrible show. Oh, Mrs. Dickerson," Babs chirped gaily to the latest arrival in the glass case department, "what a perfectly beautiful case of flowers!" and she clasped her hands ecstatically. "Do give it to Esther to place for you. Here Esther," and the happy lady with the monstrosity turned beamingly upon Esther. So *that* glass case changed hands promptly.

"You girls are so—so smart," whined little Mrs. Dickerson, "to take hold so, so fine." She had a lot of trouble with her adjectives. "We knowed you would. That's why we picked out Barbara Hale. She's so, so smart," declared the flustered lady, casting fond glances upon Esther who was almost petrified with her task of "placing" the hair flowers somewhere "to advantage."

"How's the fight coming along?" Cara sidled up to ask Babs.

"Mrs. Brownell *may* have her table removed if the chairman doesn't soon arrive. It seems a table is a table, and folks are bound to set things on it," said Babs, almost laughing outright at the absurdity of the situation.

"Cricky!" exclaimed Cara, using her father's favorite expletive, "what on earth is this coming?"

"Looks like a portable bath-tub," replied Babs as Mrs. Ricketts, the fattest woman one could possibly imagine being able to carry anything except fat, puffed up the steps, her arms encircling like a balloon auto tire, a great, big dish.

"My tureen," she exhaled. "Nothing like this in your collection, I'll say. It's been in our family for more than one hundred years. Where can I set it down? It's awfully heavy!"

"Yes, it must be," readily agreed Ruth, who was in line to accept the big dish. "I wonder where we can put it."

"On that table. Just the place. It will show off beautifully there. Set it right down——"

"But I'm afraid we can't, Mrs. Ricketts," Cara just caught her. "That's Mrs. Brownell's table and she wants it left clear to show the grain of the wood."

"Grain of the wood!" repeated the stout lady deridingly. "As if a big table like that could take up room with nothing on it. Here, I'll put my tureen on it, and if Mrs. Brownell——"

"Yes?" The little word came from Mrs.

Brownell's lips. "Your dish is really antique. What a pity it is cracked," and she adjusted her silver-framed glasses to see the crack more clearly.

"Cracked!" Mrs. Ricketts wore no glasses but she had very penetrating eyes, and she fairly glared at her old soup tureen as she repeated Mrs. Brownell's charge against it. "It is no such thing—cracked!"

"Aren't these cracks?" Nothing could ruffle the magnificant Mrs. Brownell. She had poise.

"No. They are merely tissue scratches. We had an opinion——"

But the argument was lost on the girls. They didn't care a whoopee about tissue scratches, or cracks on ugly old soup tureens. What they were interested in was the fight, according to Cara.

"And I'll bet the table wins," she told Esther. "It's quite a table, isn't it?"

"Quite a soup tureen, too," replied Esther, "and Mrs. Ricketts is bigger than Mrs. Brownell."

It was fun, after all, to be on the girls' committee, for not only were the exhibits the queerest old things imaginable, but the women who brought the articles were queer, and if not always old, at least not *very* young.

And they took so much pride in the heirlooms that the Home Exhibit afforded them a rare treat, indeed. Mrs. Brownell's table and Mrs. Rickett's soup tureen were merely samples of the goods contributed, but it was the needlework and the quilts that formed the bulk and real problem of the exhibit.

"Where'll I hang this?" Louise would call out, holding up as much as she could manage of a red and white log-cabin quilt.

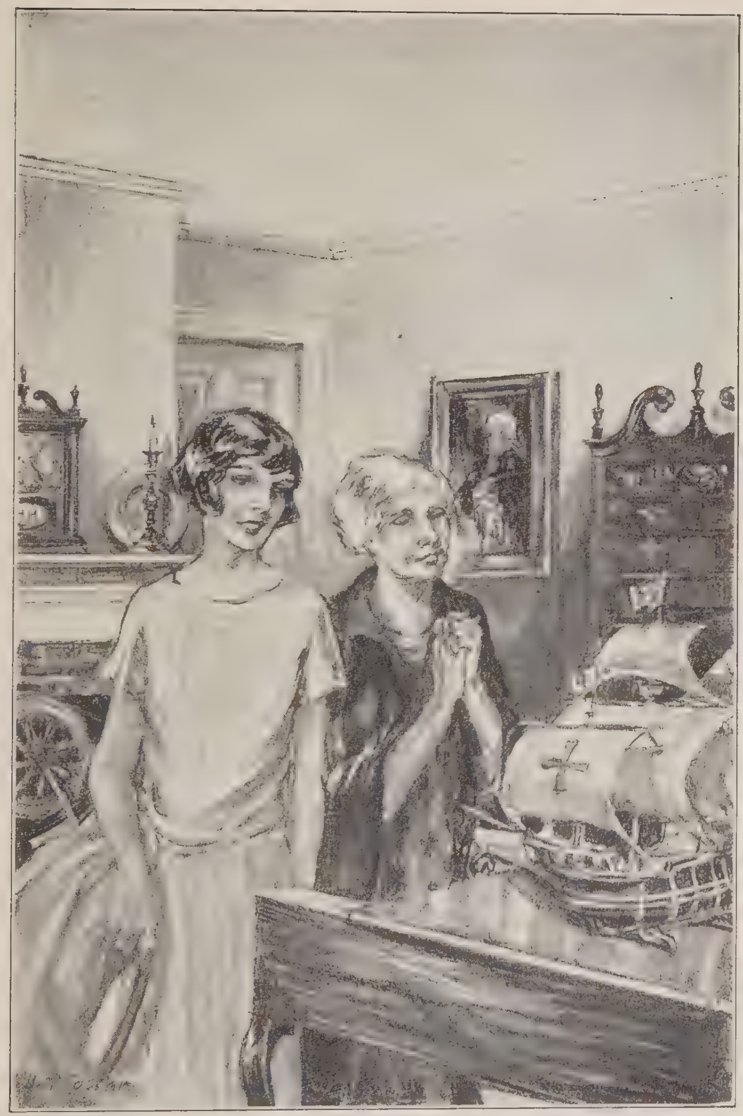
Then the owner would start in giving orders. She would want it hung "just so" over the balustrade.

"But the silk quilts and handwoven portieres are to hang over the balustrade," Miss Trainor would insist. "Mrs. Winters arranged all that." Mrs. Winters was general chairman and certainly should have been on hand on this afternoon; but she wasn't.

"These tidies," pleaded quiet little Lida, quite helplessly, "where can we show the tidies?"

"We've simply got to have a special place for the small handwork," Cara said sensibly. "We'll drown in tidies and center-pieces if we don't. Dad would send a carpenter over to fix up a nice rack, with hooks that couldn't tear. Where's Babs?"

"Yes, where is Babs?" joined in a number of



"YES, IT IS LOVELY. AND IT'S PRICELESS."

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the girls, for Barbara being chairman of the girls' committee, and the girls being in charge of all the ladder climbing and the dusting of the old nooks and cobwebby corners—to say nothing of taking the goods from the loving hands of the lenders—they certainly expected Barbara to be around all the time and in every place at once.

But just now she could not be found. The Stillwell House on the ocean front, chosen as the most suitable and convenient place to hold the summer exhibit, contained plenty of rooms and was built like a farm-house, with the entire first-floor rooms connecting by wide doorways and passages. The house had not been used as a summer home for a number of years, and those of the pretty little colony who understood values, considered the quaint place as a possible public library and Community Center for Sea Cosset.

Miss Mary-Louise Trainor had planned the Home Exhibit mainly to interest people in such a plan, and she knew perfectly well that one of the best ways of obtaining real publicity for a scheme is to have a girls' committee work on it. The girls will talk, they will tell everybody everything interesting, and if it was a wonderful old place, which the Stillwell place really was, the girls could be depended upon to let everybody know it.

"But where's Babs?" Louise asked impatiently. "I just don't know what to do with this pewter teapot."

"She won't know either," pointed out Ruth. "Stick it over on the spinet."

"And have my head taken off by Miss Douglass. That's her spinet," declared Louise.

"Now Cara has disappeared," groaned Ruth. "Let's go and see what's going on. I know they went out on the back porch." She was whispering this. "Let's sneak out and surprise them."

But Louise and Ruth could not sneak out and leave Esther and Lida alone to battle with the exhibits. So they turned to help Lida while Cara and Babs were still lost to the work and workers of the room.

The back porch of the old house was entirely screened in with high sweet-fern bushes, that one growing green that thrives on sandy soil and in a salty atmosphere. So thick were these bushes that the porch was almost dark behind them, and when Cara tiptoed out she was easily able to reach the little square extension, and hide there without being seen.

"Some one is with her!" Cara was almost saying, for Babs was talking earnestly to some one at the other end of the porch.

"A boy! And he's crying!" Cara crouched

down guiltily for she felt she was seeing and listening to something very, very secret.

Babs spoke, but the boy sobbed. He was actually crying, and that was a remarkable thing for Nicky to do.

Cara could see it was Nicky who was with Babs, although the boy's form was almost entirely shrouded in the heavy vines that clambered all over the end of the porch.

Then a child's voice, heavy with sobs, called out too loud to be unheard by any one on that porch.

"But I've got to. I tell you we must have it. I've got to——"

"Hush!" checked Babs. "They'll hear you. Don't worry, Nicky, it will be all right. You can trust us, can't you?"

"Yes, I can trust you," came the reluctant answer.

"And no one will know you came," said Babs very softly, but her voice was perfectly distinct to the other girl in her uncomfortable hiding place.

"I've got to get back," Cara told herself. "I must not let them know I was here." She just slipped quietly over the rail, between the big bushes, and when Babs, her face strangely flushed, came back to her tasks at the show-room, Cara was just folding up another quilt and forcing little squeaks of pretended admiration, so that Mrs. Baker would be pleased.

But what was the matter with Nicky?

What was he and Babs hiding?

Why was that brave little fellow sobbing so heavily?

A queer sort of secret for girls, this seemed to be, but Cara could not possibly disclose her part in it, and she knew perfectly well that Babs was not likely to say anything about hers.

CHAPTER XV

THE SANTA MARIA

THAT incident, simple as it seemed to be, immediately cast its spell over the two girls. Barbara was so upset by it, whatever it was, that she could hardly keep her mind on the quilts and tidies. Cara simply sat down in one of the big rockers—it was there for exhibition purposes only—and she declared she wasn't going to do another thing. Louise and Ruth were so curious they didn't know what they were doing, so that the girls' committee became suddenly very inefficient.

"It's too late to do anything else anyhow," Cara declared. "Let's go home."

To this all gladly agreed, all but Barbara. She insisted upon staying until her father called for her, but her real motive was to fix things up quietly when her willing but excited companions had gone. Every one wanted to help, but so many around merely lent confusion, and, as chairman, Barbara felt a certain responsibility.

So it happened she was still waiting and all alone when Miss Davis—the twin Miss Davis—came along trying to hide something beneath the folds of her old-fashioned black cape.

"I brought it in spite of her," she confided to Barbara. "Sister Tillie is such a crank. But I was determined to show it."

"Yes?" replied Barbara questioningly.

"Our great-grandfather made it," she went on, meanwhile bringing forth from its hiding place a small wooden ship model.

"Yes, it is lovely. And it's priceless. It's a model that was made in a war prison, and we have had all sorts of offers to sell it, but, of course, we would never part with it. You see, I'm so proud of it I just couldn't miss the chance to show it off."

"I don't blame you," said Babs, still gazing with spellbound admiration at the little model. It was quite small but perfect in every detail.

"But Tillie is different. We're twins, you know," confessed little Miss Davis, "but never were two sisters more unlike. We never agree on anything. Where can we put the model so that it will be sure to be safe?"

"That's a serious question," answered Babs. "I wish all the ladies hadn't gone. Some of them should have taken charge of this."

"I'd trust your judgment further than I

would theirs." said Miss Davis generously. They had placed the model on the little spinet and it looked splendidly there.

"You see, Tillie wouldn't agree that I should fetch it, but it's as much mine as hers, and I was determined to get it here. As a matter of fact, she doesn't know I did bring it," confessed Miss Isabel Davis the other twin.

"Then, aren't you afraid it will make trouble between you?" Barbara suggested.

"No doubt of it. But I don't care about that," Miss Davis insisted. "If I gave in in everything where'd I be? Now, let's see where we could hide this. I wouldn't dare to leave it on that spinet over night."

"We're going to have a watchman after dark," Barbara informed little Miss Davis. "That is, the man in the next cottage has agreed to watch for us after he brings in his fish nets. He's a fisherman, you know."

"I've heard one did take that old place, but he's a stranger around here, isn't he?"

"The ladies seem to know him. They've bought fish from him and say he's very reliable," Barbara answered. "But I must hurry. Father will be here for me soon. Where will we hide the little galleon?"

"I've been looking around——"

"Here!" she exclaimed. "There's a little cubby-hole built in the bricks back of this Dutch oven. It ought to be safe there."

"Yes. That's fine. You put it in. It will surely be safe there," agreed Miss Davis, only too gladly.

Barbara picked the model up carefully and carried it over to the hearth. Then she turned on the little electric candle light that spread a soft glow over the dark bricks, opened the door of the closet and still more carefully set the war-time trophy within. Neither she nor Miss Davis spoke while all this was going on, for somehow she felt the importance of secrecy.

Then, just as Barbara turned to switch off the light, they both heard a noise.

"Some one at the window!" gasped Miss Davis.

"Yes, I heard some one," admitted Barbara, "and it couldn't have been Dad."

But Miss Davis was at the door before Barbara had finished.

"There he goes," she exclaimed. "And he's that little Italian boy. The one whose father is in prison. Do you suppose he saw us?"

"Yes, that's Nicky," added Barbara, for she too was at the door and she could see little Nicky scampering along the sandy beach in full sight.

"We don't need to worry about him. He's perfectly honest."

"Land sakes, I hope so," sighed Miss Davis. "For if anything happened to the *Santa Maria* I might as well never go back home. I couldn't live a day under the roof with Tillie. She's so fond of it. Perhaps, after all, I did wrong to fetch it," she appeared to relent.

"If you feel that way about it you can come and get it again tomorrow," suggested Babs, quite weary of the whole affair. "But I'm sure it would be lovely to have it in the exhibit. You know, the idea is to get materials that may be used in a little museum here eventually," she explained.

"That's just what I thought. And the *Santa Maria* belongs in a museum," declared Miss Davis. "It's perfectly foolish to have it locked up in our old cabinet. Yes, I'll leave it and talk it over with Tillie. She's as changeable as the wind, and perhaps I can talk her around. There's that boy stopping at the fisherman's place," she interrupted herself. "He must know him."

"Very likely, for Nicky knows the lighthouse keeper and others around here. He's a busy little fellow and runs errands, you know," concluded Barbara. "Well, here's Dad. I just have to lock this door—everything else is locked. Won't you ride out with us, Miss Davis?" she invited the small woman who was really very agreeable, and eager to help Barbara with the locking up or anything else left to be done.

"I'd be glad to, for I am tired," admitted Miss Davis. "You see, I had to wait so late to get rid of Tillie. She was going in town all afternoon but I thought she'd never get started."

Dr. Hale was waiting now, and it took but a few minutes for Babs and Miss Davis to climb into the car.

"Everything all right, daughter?" he asked solicitously, after greeting the guest.

"Oh, yes, Dads, all right," Barbara replied a little wearily. "Miss Davis and I have a secret, something really wonderful to exhibit and we had quite a time hiding it," she told her father briefly.

He laughed at that. "I don't imagine the pirates will come ashore tonight," he joked. "It is too beautifully clear for their black deeds, so I guess your treasure will be safe," he ended pleasantly.

"Oh, there's little Nicky, Dads," Barbara exclaimed, as Nicky did emerge from behind some boxes that were piled at the side of the fisherman's cottage. "I must speak to him."

Dr. Hale pulled his car up as short as his brakes allowed, and Nicky stood for a few moments as if waiting for them to reach him. Then, suddenly and without a cause which could be thought of by Barbara, he turned, ducked behind the boxes again and was as completely out of sight as if they had never seen him.

"I wonder what he did that for?" Babs exclaimed in astonishment.

"He didn't want to see you, evidently," replied Dr. Hale, throwing his car into gear again.

"Those youngsters can't be depended upon," said Miss Davis sagely. "They have no one to teach them anything so they pick up what is wrong."

"Not Nicky," defended Barbara. "He's a fine little fellow."

"Do you know him so well?" queried the woman, in surprise.

"Yes, I do," stoutly declared Barbara. "And I know him to be—just splendid," she finished, after an agitated pause.

"You see, Miss Davis," said Dr. Hale politely, "my daughter is something of a philanthropist. She is always doing something for the neglected ones," and he continued to talk in that strain for some minutes. But Barbara was not hearing a word he said.

She was wondering what was the matter with Nicky. Long before Miss Davis spoke of hearing a noise around the Community House, Barbara had caught a glimpse of Nicky. He was evidently trying to find out whom she was talking to, and he must have seen both her and Miss Davis with the little model craft, and also he must have seen where they hid it.

"But that couldn't make any difference," Barbara told herself, for she would even have trusted Nicky to do the hiding if he had been there, in the long old-fashioned room when she pried open the cupboard door.

"And so you and Miss Davis have a state secret," the doctor interrupted her thoughts, as he pulled up to the porch of Miss Davis' cottage.

"Yes," said Barbara simply. She couldn't seem to find her tongue, as Dora might have said.

"Don't talk about secrets around here," whispered Miss Davis, for her sister Tillie was just then coming to the door to see who might be arriving.

On the way home the doctor noticed Babs' distraction.

"Anything go wrong with the show, girlie?" he asked gaily.

"Oh, no, why?" evaded Babs.

"You seem to have an awful lot on your mind for the first day," replied her father.

"I have," admitted Babs, still inattentive.

"I hope you are not going to have worries about the thing," he said more decidedly, for none knew better than he that only worry could bring that blank look to his daughter's face.

"Indeed I am not," declared Barbara, now beginning to see what he meant. "We had a lot of fun. You should see some of the junk the ladies brought in and fought over."

"Fought over?"

"Yes, where the stuff should be put, you know. Mrs. Brownell brought or had sent a really fine old table and it seemed as if everybody wanted her particular article put on that table." This was quite a satisfactory speech for Babs under the circumstances.

"I can imagine what a fuss a lot of women would make over heirlooms," the doctor commented. "What are we entering?"

"Why, what could we enter?" Babs repeated in surprise. "What heirlooms have we?"

"Take a look in the attic tomorrow," her father replied laconically. "You may find something worth while." Dr. Hale was being reflective. He seemed to know about the attic.

"All right Dads, I will," Barbara agreed brightly. "It would be nice for us to have something to show. You have lived here longer than most of the *new* people," she pointed out as they left the car in the garage and together walked up to their house.

"We have lived here for some time, Babs," her father said rather solemnly. "But I just wonder if this place isn't a little too big for just you and me?"

"Dads!"

"Oh, I don't mean this year," he hurried to reassure her, "but—well, don't let's think about it, Bobolink," and he threw his arm fondly around her. "Think about your funny old ladies and their funny old home week," he counselled, anxious to divert her attention.

But Babs couldn't think about those things at all.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN A GIRL THINKS HARD

SHE just couldn't get Nicky off her mind. Even the fun of sorting out the old heirlooms was not enough to blot out her anxiety.

"I believe now," she admitted, "that it isn't the best thing for a girl to get too interested in strangers: we can never understand them, especially those of other nationalities."

But Nicky was so interesting, and he seemed to be so abused. It was this instinct of sympathy, so natural to all generous girls, that was leading Barbara into tangled paths.

First, she had bought the old candlesticks, then Dudley Burke bought a pair. That was on the day that Nicky hurt his hand and all the other suspicious things happened, none of which had yet been explained.

But it was the fancy wood carving on the book-ends that Cara bought that excited the most interest. The wood had been freshly carved, but by whom? Who could be the artist and where was he hidden and why?

Barbara never suspected Nicky of any trickery, however, and she had maintained perfect confidence in him until now. Now she too was being forced to question. What did he mean by that plea for money made to her this very afternoon? Why did he need five dollars so urgently? And if he did need it, why could he not tell her what it was needed for?

She didn't like the little boy sneaking around after her, and sneaking was the only word applicable to his peculiar methods. Even generous Cara was warning her these days that you can't trust strangers too far, especially those clever little boys.

The happenings of that afternoon were vividly pictured now to Barbara, while she sat in her room, pondering. It was evening again, and with quiet hours spread out before her a perfect race of happenings dashed in and out of her perturbed mind.

Nicky, always Nicky, but why?

"Of course I've never had a sister or a brother," she reasoned, "and perhaps I've needed one. And Nicky is so interesting and so sort of mysterious."

But when he climbed over the rail of the back porch at the Community House that afternoon, and managed, as only he could manage, to get

Babs' attention, she was bothered. She didn't want the girls to know about that, and of course she did not know that Cara had overheard anything. It was better for her that she did not, for that would have added greatly to her anxieties.

It had all happened so quickly. He came back after she explained to him why she could not exhibit the lovely candlesticks, and naturally, he was heart-broken about that. But she insisted he would have to tell who carved them if she put them in the show-room. He protested he could not do that, no, never, not for anything, and so he had gone away a very sorrowful little boy, taking back the precious pair of candlesticks in the homemade oilcloth covering.

And the queerest part of it was he insisted they could not be sold, as much as he and his folks needed money, he couldn't sell those candlesticks. They were beautifully carved and beautifully tinted, but Barbara was too anxious to get rid of Nicky to examine them very closely.

He came back a little later and begged that she would give him five dollars. He said he simply had to have it, and strange to say he was so excited he could not keep his voice down. It was then that Cara overheard him sobbing and pleading, and it was then that Barbara tried to scold and reason with him.

Why should he bother her so? Hadn't she done all she could for him? And from whom would or could she borrow five dollars at a few moments' notice?

"But you're my friend, ain't you?" he pointed out reasonably enough, "and I've got to have it."

"Have you no other friends?" Barbara had asked him then.

"Sure," was Nicky's reply. "But I did borrow from them."

"Do you borrow—a lot?"

"Have to," Nicky had replied easily. "But I'm goin'-a pay it back soon. I kin work soon, Captain Quiller says he'll give me a job."

"Captain Quiller?"

There had not been time there on the porch to recall Captain Quiller's interest in Nicky, but Barbara vividly remembered that night in the storm, when the little boy had fallen by the roadside from his broken-down "bike," with that precious can of oil propped up against a mud-hill so that it couldn't spill.

"And Nicky deserves recognition for that," Barbara was now telling herself. "I do wish I would get an answer to my letter from Washington."

Conflicting thoughts! First worry about the little Italian boy, then a secret rejoicing in his bravery. Barbara didn't realize that this was unusual for a girl of her years, that most girls would not have given a second thought to these matters. But she *was* different, she had been trained, or had trained herself, to think seriously, and so she was but following her natural bent. She wasn't old-fashioned, she was simply wise.

Meanwhile the other girls were being frankly suspicious. Nothing could persuade them that a criminal of some sort wasn't being hidden in the little shack that served to shelter Nicky's family. That was, perhaps, natural enough, when every one knew that the gate-keeper, Marcusi, had been put in jail, and the girls had seen, with their own eyes, how wildly excited those within the house acted when strangers approached.

Then this fine wood carving; who was doing that and why wouldn't Nicky tell?

Only the feeling of loyalty to Barbara kept the other girls subdued in expressing *their* opinions. She wouldn't tolerate a word against Nicky, and so they talked secretly, only.

But they watched, with keen interest, the course of events.

"I can't see what she finds worth bothering with in those Italians," would likely be Louise's answer.

Barbara's attitude was defiant. She would have nothing said about Nicky. Cara alone dared to suggest to her that one just can't understand strange children. But even Cara could not deter her. Nor could her father, no, not even the bossy Dora, who had no business to order Barbara to give up her interest in "those youngsters."

But this afternoon something had happened that had influenced Barbara. Nicky had run away from her. He must have seen her wave to him to come up to the car, when Dr. Hale was driving her and Miss Davis home, and he had scurried off behind those old boxes like a—like a—no, Babs wouldn't say it; she wouldn't even think it. Nicky must have had some good reason for that suspicious act.

Tonight she tried to read; there was her favorite magazine that had just come by mail, but she could find nothing to interest her in its usually fascinating pages.

"If I had had a little brother," she was thinking, "I should have liked his eyes to be like Nicky's. They're such an agate brown, like my best marbles," she concluded.

That gave her a new idea. Where was that bag of marbles? She had always kept them, loved to count them and shoot them on the old braided rug that Dora insisted was best in front of Barbara's bed.

As the idea came to her she jumped up and she rummaged in the drawer of her stand, where her things least in use were stored, and after going to the very bottom several times she unearthed the little gingham bag. The marbles in it seemed to caress her fingers as she held them even through the gingham cover; she had always loved to play marbles.

Down on the rug she squatted again and set the agates on the faded blue line. Then, just as she used to do when she was ten years old, and even as young as six years old, she began to play.

Knock! Knock! she hit the brown "real." It flew off the rug and rolled boldly over the wood floor but Babs didn't go after it. She picked another shooter from the little pool of marbles she had spilled out and took aim at a little brown "migg."

"Now Miggsy," she said aloud, for no one could have heard her, "I've got to get you."

But her aim was not true and the "migg" never moved.

She tried again and hit the pretty blue

"glassy." Squatting back against her heels Barbara laughed merrily.

"Just like Nicky," she was thinking. "Little and brown and defiant. That's the reason he's so interesting," and she took another shot at the migg.

Over the floor rolled noisily a number of the agates, but the smallest one of all still escaped, that is, it took but a few turns and still stuck to the rug.

"Guess I've forgotten how to shoot," Barbara concluded, gathering up the marbles and dropping them one by one into the bag. "I'll give these to Nicky."

The jangling of the telephone disturbed her. She hurried down stairs to answer the call.

"Yes, this is Babs. Hello Cara! What's the excitement?" was what she said into the transmitter.

After a very brief pause Babs' voice was heard answering again.

"I couldn't go up again tonight. No, I didn't know they were going to do anything tonight. Well, I'm glad you were there to represent us. I got enough of it this afternoon." Babs again.

It was Cara talking, of course, and she had told Babs that she had just been down to the Community House. That some of the ladies went down to fix things up, and when Cara and Dorothy Blair, one of the older girls, were passing and saw the lights, they went in.

"And say, Babs," Cara began again over the wire, in that way that means something particular is going to be disclosed. "If I were you I'd tell Nicky not to come around there any more. You know how fussy those old ladies are about the family junk."

"Oh yes, I know," Babs readily agreed, and her toes working nervously up and down in her slippers didn't show over the telephone, of course.

"Not that *he* isn't all right," continued Cara, thoughtfully, "but just because he's a small boy, you know."

"I don't want him to come around," Babs quietly declared. "There are too many little things there, and if anything gets mislaid the women would be sure to blame it on the boys."

"Coming down early in the morning?" Cara asked next.

"I suppose I'll have to," Babs answered. "We'll be expected to do everything from polishing furniture to darning Civil War socks, I suppose," she added laughing lightly.

"I'll call for you about nine, shall I?" Cara asked.

"I'll be ready, and thanks, Cara, for calling."

"Anything happen after we left?" pursued Cara just to keep the wire busy.

"No, that is not anything much." The secret of Miss Davis' ship model could not be told over the phone, Babs had promptly decided. And because of its importance and Miss Davis' indecision concerning the real displaying of the model, Babs felt the least said about it to any one, the better. And that meant that she wouldn't say anything about it to any one.

So the girls talked a few minutes longer, and then reluctantly hung up their respective receivers.

Cara always cheered Babs up. She had a way of dispelling the little fears that would unconsciously steal in upon the other girl, and the very sound of her laughing voice, the very indifferent, easy way in which she so naturally pointed out that Nicky Marcusi shouldn't be seen around the Community House, unless he was with some one who might later come in to see the exhibit, sort of broke up Babs' unaccountable fit of anxiety.

"I won't have any little boys running around there while I'm in charge," she decided as she again reached her own room and prepared for bed. "There's no telling what youngsters might do and just think it smart."

But Nicky so seldom had any boys with him, or he was so seldom with other boys that this newest argument didn't seem quite sincere.

"And besides that," Babs was thinking not exactly out loud but loud enough for her own secret use, "I'm not going to take any more responsibility there. It's the women's affair and they must manage it. I feel as if I had done enough already with their old moth-eaten delaine quilts," and she took her bag of marbles from the center of her bed where she had dropped them when the telephone rang, and after tossing them up a few times to catch them like a bean bag, she finally settled down to read the despised magazine.

CHAPTER XVII

THE LOSS

Barbara couldn't believe it; Miss Davis' model was gone! Stolen from the Dutch oven and no one had seen them hide it there. That is, no one but Nicky.

It was not yet nine o'clock next morning when Miss Davis came around and told Barbara. She had decided not to oppose her sister and went out to the Community House to get the family heirloom: and it was gone!

Early as it was some of the ladies were already there, and she made straight for the oven without telling them what she was going for.

"I almost fainted," she told Barbara, not being far from a faint even then, "when I opened that cubby-hole door and saw the place empty I just screamed."

"Gone!" Barbara repeated incredulously. "Who could have found it?"

"Well, you know," sobbed Miss Davis, "there were youngsters watching in that window, and we've got to find that Italian boy right away, before he has a chance to sell it."

"You mean Nickolas Marcusi?"

"I mean that little fellow who shot out in the road before us and then scurried off like a rat," replied the woman bitterly. "Mean to say that wasn't a guilty thing to do?"

"I couldn't think that boy guilty of doing anything dishonorable," Barbara retorted, "I've known him to be too fine a little fellow."

"Fine little fellows can fool you, my girl," snapped the woman who was still fanning herself with her hat although the morning was delightfully cool. "Sometimes they think it's fun to be brave, and they think it smart to be able to steal things."

"Nicky wouldn't steal anything," wailed Barbara. She never cried; but if she had been given to tears they would have flooded her eyes then. To call Nicky a thief!

"Well, come along and let's see if we can find him," ordered Miss Davis, for her tone was too emphatic to be otherwise termed. "No telling what a boy might do with a boat like that. He might put it on a string in the ocean. Oh, mercy me! What an unlucky woman I am? Why did I go against Tillie?" She sobbed again, and there was no denying the genuineness of her grief.

Dr. Hale was out and Dora seemed out of

reach, which was fortunate for Barbara. She would not have had them hear of her trouble for anything.

"I'll be ready in a minute, Miss Davis," she told her caller. "We'll go over to the pavilion and I'll phone Cara Burke. She'll drive me out to where the Italians live, but there really isn't any use of your coming. It's an awful place to go," She didn't want Miss Davis to go. She felt her presence would have hindered her greatly in her search for Nicky.

"But *I* must go," insisted the woman. "I wouldn't wait any place, I'm too nervous," and she almost pulled the brim off her hat in an attempt to get it on her head. "Yes, I'll go right along. I've got to keep moving. You've no idea what it means to me. Why, we were offered a pile of money for that little model, but, of course, we wouldn't think of selling it. Oh, dear," and she jabbed her handkerchief against her cheek, "why ever did I do such a thing! Pride, just foolish pride. Wanted to show it off. Well, this is what I get for it."

She talked and talked, and Barbara was almost as nervous as was the woman herself. If her father should come back he would have to hear all the story, and if Dora came back she would listen to every word that she could catch.

"Come on, Miss Davis," said Barbara, squatting her little felt hat on her head without even knowing she was doing it. "Of course I'm awfully sorry, terribly. But still, I can't feel it is my fault; I just followed your advice you know, and it was my idea that you shouldn't have left the model there."

"Oh, I know it. Don't make me feel worse——"

"I don't want you to feel any worse, you know that, Miss Davis," Barbara interrupted, for indeed she was very sorry enough for the poor, distressed little lady. "I merely want it to be understood that I didn't and couldn't take the responsibility of any goods left there. We girls are only supposed to do the things that the ladies tell us to do. You see, we are merely a subcommittee."

"But, thank goodness, you were there and that I didn't confide in any of the women," exclaimed Miss Davis. "If I had told that to a single woman, Tillie would be dying of grief now. Women can't keep anything to themselves," she declared a little surprisingly, under the circumstances.

"Don't you suppose your sister will miss it from the cabinet?"

"No, not for this week, because she left for

Blueberry Corners this very morning. That's the only comfort. If I'll only be able to get it back before *she* gets back. Do hurry, dear. I don't know what I'm saying I'm so upset. I hope I wasn't cross to you?"

"Oh, no, not at all, Miss Davis," Babs assured her. "I can easily understand how you feel. And I feel dreadfully about it too. Somehow I couldn't sleep last night and I didn't know why. Come along, I'm ready," and they went off, Babs dropping a note on her father's desk as she went.

Cara met them before they reached the corner. The original plan was to have Cara call at the house, but because of Miss Davis' excited state of mind, and the constant danger of Dora overhearing her, Babs had hurried out before the appointed time. She knew she would meet Cara before she turned into Landing.

"Hop right in," was Cara's cheerful greeting. Then she paused to give Babs a chance to introduce the stranger.

"And if you don't mind, Cara," Babs continued after the brief introduction, "we'll drive out to the Italian settlement. We want to see Nicky."

"Nicky!" Cara's tone was in dispute. She meant to convey again to Babs her opposition to her constant interest in the Italians.

"Yes, and it's very important," put in Miss Davis before Babs could answer. "In fact we've *got* to find him."

"Oh," said Cara in bewilderment. This was something new, she understood now; something new, but what?

Babs took her place in the front seat of the auto beside Cara, and while Miss Davis was settling herself in the back seat, managed to whisper enough to Cara to give the very least inkling of the matter.

"Something we lost," she said, "and maybe Nicky has seen it. He was there yesterday when we were closing up."

"Oh," said Cara again, and then she drove on.

Miss Davis seemed suddenly to have become speechless. Perhaps it was exhaustion, for she must have labored under a heavy strain since discovering the loss of the model, but, at any rate, she was now drooping in the back seat of Cara's car as if "every friend in the world had deserted her"; that was the way her attitude impressed the girls.

They tried to talk casually but it was a failure as far as Babs was concerned, and when the usual group of urchins surrounded their car, when it was stopped as near to Nicky's house as

Babs wanted Cara to drive, it was a discouraged girl who alighted. Barbara Hale was sorry she had ever bothered about these little foreigners, yet, quickly as that thought darted through her mind, there came another.

What about Nicky saving the lighthouse lamp from darkness during that awful storm? What other boy of his age would have been as brave as he had been then?

"I'll run over and see if he's around," she told Cara and Miss Davis, in real fear that Miss Davis would insist upon going with her. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Over the rough tracks she stumbled. Everything seemed horrid. The air was thick with smoke, there were odors of all kinds, from factory fumes to puddles from rain, left standing in hidden places where even the sun couldn't find them.

And as she hurried along her opinion of all this had suddenly changed. Yesterday she would have pitied those poor people living in such a disordered place, but today she pitied herself that she had to go through there.

"If I only hadn't been so foolish," she kept thinking. "And I've missed a lot of good times this summer just by this."

Presently she called to a group of children.

And their answer brought Babs to a sudden stop.

"You don't mean that the Marcusis have moved away?" she repeated in surprise.

"Yes, Mam, lit out last night," a small boy told her. "Guess they hadda skip," he added impishly.

"They did not either," defended another. "Some one took sick or somthin'."

But Barbara had to be sure. She could not believe that those people were gone, without letting her know. But why should they have let her know?

She stumbled on farther, the children tagging along at her heels, saying all sorts of foolish things about Nicky's family.

But she paid little attention to them, although her ears at least heard every word they said.

"Yep, they didn't pay the milk-man either," one saucy little fellow gaily announced. "An' the old man's in jail so they can't do nawthin' to him——"

"Shut up, you Tony, your folks ain't such a much. Whata you knockin' about?"

"Oh, run along about your business," ordered Barbara sharply turning unexpectedly around and facing them. "You don't have to come with me. I didn't ask you to."

"Beat it, fellers," the big boy took up the cause. "She don't want you. I'll show her the house."

"Maybe you think she wants *you,* Smarty Leganto," came back a challenge for the chivalrous one. "She knows the place, don't she? But they ain't anybody in it. They's moved, we told you."

It was no use. She couldn't get rid of them. So she hurried along and was now in front of that place likely called a house, by the man who owned it, but was merely a shack to all other eyes.

The windows were raised, the hideously pictured curtains were not to be seen, and the door stood wide open.

"Now you see," came a taunt from the crowd. "They's gone, ain't they? What did we tell you? Now, ain't they gone?"

"Oh, do stop," begged Barbara. "Of course they are gone. But why shouldn't they move if they wanted to?" This was by no means a question, rather it was a declaration. She was trying to answer her own question. "Why shouldn't this family move if they wanted to?"

It takes so little to make excitement for such children as those surrounding her, that even the difference in their clothes and hers, the fact that she came in a car, and the still more surprising fact that she should evince interest in a family like Nicky's, served to give the youngsters a wonderful time. And in spite of her protests they were bound to make the most of it. And they did.

As she turned back to the car she wondered what she would say to Miss Davis. If only she had not come along with them Babs might have told the whole story to Cara, and together they could have thought up something to do about it. Even a little delay would have helped so much. But there Miss Davis sat in the car, her head out the side, waiting eagerly for Babs' return.

"I just can't tell her they have moved," Babs decided quickly, "not just yet. I'll say there was no one in."

"All out!" exclaimed Miss Davis, just as Barbara knew she would. "But we've got to find that boy——"

"I'll come back with Cara in a little while," Babs interrupted. "You see, those people have to work, even the children, and it's pretty early to expect to find them around home."

"But that boy," (how Barbara wished she would not so persistently attack Nicky) "he must be around some place. It seems to me I have met him along the road every day this summer but just today," wailed Miss Davis.

"Don't worry," Cara ventured to remark.

"We know how to find the youngsters; don't we Babs?" and she shot a look at Babs that was infinitely comforting.

"Yes," the other girl replied, already seated beside Cara. "We know the haunts. I guess we'll have to go over to the Community House now," she proposed. "I'm supposed to be around there some time this morning."

"Then drop me off home, please," begged the still perturbed little woman. "I couldn't go over there again, that is, not just now," she hurried to modify, lest Cara might suspect she was really in distress about something.

Just as if Cara didn't.

CHAPTER XVIII

SUSPICIONS

No sooner had they deposited Miss Davis at her front gate than Cara turned to Babs.

"Now see here, Sister," she began facetiously, "you've got to tell me all about this. What's on your mind?"

"Of course, Cara, I intend to tell you. I've just been waiting for a chance," answered Babs, sullenly.

"Well, here's your chance. Go ahead and tell. And judging from the look on your alabaster face it needs to be told. Honestly Babs, you look years older since yesterday. Nobody murdered, I hope?"

Babs laughed, but it was a sickly little laugh, and had nothing to do with merriment.

"No, not murder exactly," Babs replied after an embarassed pause. "But you know how seriously those old ladies take their family heirlooms."

"Yes."

"And you know the Davis ladies are twins."

"Yes."

"Well, one twinnie wanted to show a family piece and the other twinnie objected," Babs continued, in a voice as even as a tape line put through the phonograph.

"She would. All twinnies are that way. Go ahead," proposed Cara a little impatiently.

Barbara sighed. She had secretly gone over the details of the loss so often since Miss Davis came this morning, that her weary brain fairly pricked in dismay at encountering the subject in word form.

"Miss Davis brought a little ship model, one of those old-time murderous, pirate-prisoner sailing things," she began bravely, "and it has disappeared."

"Disappeared! Do you mean the famous Davis model of Columbus' *Santa Maria?*" Cara almost stopped her car unconsciously, in surprise.

"Yes," said Babs, from tightened lips.

"Oh, how dreadful! How did it disappear? How could it, I mean?"

"I don't know," Babs flared back this time. "You don't suppose I *do* know, do you, Cara?"

"Oh, I didn't mean that, Babs; of course you don't know," Cara sort of apologized. "But I thought you might have some idea. Here we are. Going to stay long? I've got to drive Mother to the village——"

"Don't think of coming for me, Cara," Babs interrupted as she stepped out of the car in front of the Community House. "I need the walk back home. I'm not going to stay long, either," she declared, "for I don't see a lot of fun in sorting this truck. Of course, we've promised, and we've got to help," she recalled, "but it's women's work; we do better in swimming this time of year."

"We certainly do, Babs," Cara promptly agreed. "But you haven't unburdened your soul." She had a merry way of making things easier. Most of Babs' troubles seemed to take wings when Cara Burke blew her breath at them. But this was different. It wouldn't go. It couldn't go when each step added weight to the worry.

Nicky was gone!

"You know," Babs almost whispered to Cara, for she had one foot on the running board and that brought her very close to Cara's ear, "you know," she repeated, "Nicky's folks have moved."

"I guessed that," Cara answered.

"Why?"

"Because I heard him begging you for money yesterday on the porch. Don't look so alarmed.

I went out looking for you and heard him almost sobbing for some money," said Cara.

"Who heard us?" Another shock for Babs.

"Oh, don't look so panicky," smiled Cara. "I didn't hear anything important. Those youngsters are always after money and there was nothing strange in Nicky's wanting some. I suppose he wanted it to help out with the moving."

"I suppose so," agreed Babs. Once again Cara vanquished a bugbear. What harm had there been in Nicky's asking for money, after all?

"What did the girls say?" Babs asked evenly. "Were they looking for me?"

"Oh, you know what *they* would say. Well, that's what they said. But Babs, old girl, you just better jump in here again and ride around with me," Cara proposed. "You don't look a bit like Old Home Week and you shouldn't go in there. That's a girl," she chanted, for Babs was stepping back into the car. "Now, sit close to your old friend and pour out the whole horrible tale. How did the *Santa Maria* disappear? Who was around when you left last night?"

Babs felt a little gasp catch at her throat. That was it. Who was around?

"Just Miss Davis and I were there," she began, but her sigh meant more than her words.

"Babs ducky," pleaded Cara ever so kindly, "don't you think you will feel better when you tell me? You can trust me, can't you?"

That appeal stirred a new emotion in Barbara Hale.

"Of course I can, Cara," she answered instantly, "and you likely know exactly what is worrying me. I'm afraid Nicky took that model!"

"Oh, Babs! He couldn't. Not Nicky!"

"You're a love to have such confidence in him, Cara. That helps." Babs showed her relief. "There must be a good reason for such confidence as we have. But the poor little fellow! You see, how it looks; his wanting money so badly, and then—this."

Cara glanced at her wrist watch. "I've got an hour before time to go for Mother," she said, "so let's go down to the beach. The brisk air will whip us up a little. We're fagged," she said smilingly, "especially you. Like old ladies who need catnip tea."

A few minutes later they were discussing Nicky's flight earnestly, and with a determined effort to help him.

"But how can we ever find him?" lamented Babs. "You know how queer those Italians are.

If we just ask a question about where the Marcusis have moved to they'll suspect we are enemies and they'll do everything to hide their tracks. What on earth can we do?" Babs wondered and wondered.

"Are you sure no other boy was with him when he peeked in the window?" Cara questioned.

"Not sure; I couldn't see well for it was nearly dark. But you know he is almost always alone."

"Yes; poor kid, he doesn't get much chance to play, I guess," Cara replied. "Seems as if he is either selling junk or falling off bicycles. You never got any reply from Washington about his heroism, did you?"

"No. If only I did that might help," sighed Babs. "But Cara, I can't help thinking that Nicky looked guilty when he bolted out before Dad's car. Even Miss Davis noticed that."

"Oh, Miss Davis!" scoffed Cara. "She'd be sure to think that. But it doesn't mean a thing. Babs, I'm sure Nicky wouldn't go off without leaving some word for you. He's too smart to forget you."

"Why?" asked Babs innocently.

"Why? Because he idolizes you. Because

he thinks you are his guardian angel. Don't you know the girls even said your father was going to adopt him?"

"Cara Burke!" That left Babs speechless.

"Yes, indeed they did," Cara repeated. "And it wouldn't be a bad idea. Can you believe that Dud asked Dad if *we* couldn't take him? Dud is just crazy about the youngster. And maybe you didn't know that Dud took him and his old bike and the oil can all the way over to Breakintake to have a real photograph made. He declared he was going to send it to some news syndicate——"

"For gracious sake!" exclaimed Babs. "He didn't!"

"He did, too. You don't know what a hustler my brother is," wound up Cara, proudly.

"Well," gasped Babs, brightening at all this good news, "I guess I do know how smart Dud is, Cara. Didn't I spend hours racing around in his good little car when I should have been doing other things at your house party?"

"You certainly did," laughed Cara. They were cheered up considerably now.

"And just imagine the girls thinking that we, Dad and I, could take Nicky," Babs went on. "They evidently don't know how poor we are," she said, as if glad to say it, as if she feared giving Cara a false impression of her own humble circumstances.

"Poor! indeed! You're rich in a lot of things, Babs," spoke up Cara. "And if you wanted to take Nicky you would soon find out what a real help he could be."

"I wish I had taken him—last night," declared Babs, tossing her head to one side so far that her hair came tumbling down like a curtain over one eye. "But it's too late to make wishes; what we have got to do is to make plans. You see, Cara, it would be so much better if we could get hold of Nicky right away, because Miss Davis' twin sister Tillie is away. If we could find him, somehow I feel we would find the *Santa Maria*."

"You don't think he took it?"

"No, I don't. But I feel he would know something about it," Babs insisted.

"So do I: I might as well admit that," Cara promptly added. "But say, Babs, did you ever find out anything at all about who did the beautiful wood carving?"

"No, I didn't."

"It must have been done in Nicky's home."

"Why? He could have gone out for it, some place."

"Hardly. Because one morning Dud went around to the house and gave the whistle he had learned to call Nicky with. When Nicky answered him his sweater pockets were filled with fine wood shavings. Dud said he kept playing with the shavings and smelling of their sandalwood odor. There wasn't a doubt about it they came straight from Nicky's house.

"That's very queer," Babs pondered. "No one but a man could do such skilled work, and who could the man be? That family is helped by the town, you know. They have no real means of support, since their father was taken from them."

"Well, I've got to go now," Cara decided after a glance at her watch. "Mother is coming over to the club, the Community House of course. She has spent the morning digging up family relics. Hope she hasn't unearthed any of my love letters," the girl chuckled. "They *would* be worth exhibiting."

"Or any of your early attempts at art," added Babs. "They'd make quite a showing if Mrs. Brownell would let you put them on easels on her old mahogany table."

"Oh, that old table! Wasn't it too funny how they fought about it yesterday? I suppose it will be the spinet today. Really that spinet is worth fighting over," Cara added thoughtfully. "It is a genuine antique."

"Don't let's talk about antiques," begged Babs. "It gives me the shivers, after the ship model. But say, Cara, I've a notion to go to Captain Quiller. He ought to know where the Marcusis would be apt to go to."

"Bright idea," agreed Cara, swinging an arm around her companion. "I'll take you after lunch. Don't worry in the meantime. I'll drop in and see if Miss Davis is alive yet." Cara would do anything and everything to help Babs.

"All right, thanks a lot. I don't know what I'd do without you, Cara," said Babs, affectionately. "You see, I've lost Glenn."

"Yes *I* see," chuckled Cara. "He runs around with Dud and sometimes they condescend to let me hitch on. But girls are best; aren't they, Babby?"

"Yes *they* are, Cara. See what I did by chumming with even a little fellow. I'd give a whole lot this very minute to forget Nicky Marcusi."

"You wouldn't!"

"No, I don't suppose I would either," amended Babs. "And besides, we have a mystery to ferret out. Who carved the candlesticks?"

"A noble soul whoever he is," declared Cara, "for Mother declares no one else could have done that work, and Mother always knows—about candlesticks," said Cara slyly.

"But the boat," sighed Babs as they were again taking their seats in the auto. "Why will twins inherit valuable war-time convict-prison-made models?"

"Because, being twins they had to inherit something silly," laughed Cara. "But let's hope for good news from Captain Quiller. Dad thinks he's a rare old character. He goes down to the lighthouse often just to talk with him. I'll tell you, Babby, we started something at that famous house party, didn't we?"

"A lot," agreed Babs. She threw out her arms yawning with relief. "I do feel better," she said with a smothered sigh. "You have no idea how blue I was."

"Haven't I? Didn't I suspect murder? Say, Babs, you can show more moods in your face than a whole movie show. You ought to go into the movies," she joked. "You wouldn't have to do a thing but look and then keep on looking, differently."

They were able to joke now, even Babs was almost like herself again. But it was no easy matter to feel cheerful and also feel somewhat responsible for the loss of that precious model.

Not that Barbara had had anything directly to do with it, but because she had opposed everybody in keeping up her interest in the little Italian. And just now it certainly looked pretty black for Nickolas Marcusi Junior's reputation.

"Trouble is," said Cara without hinting at what she was going to talk about, "if they found Nicky has had anything to do with that they'll just grab him up and clap him in a reform school."

"Oh, Cara, they wouldn't!" exclaimed Babs in real terror.

"Well, that's what I think they might do," said Cara, regretting instantly her careless remark. "Of course, with such good friends as your father and my father and Captain Quiller he might have a better chance."

"Cara, it would be simply terrible if the State should take that boy from his mother after having taken the father. Oh, we must hurry to Captain Quiller," wailed Babs. "Miss Davis is so nervous she might go to old Chief Morgan, and he doesn't know any more about police work than the ugly old stupid yellow dog that hounds his heels."

"I'm sorry I said that, Babs," confessed Cara, seeing how newly excited Babs had become. "There is no reason in the world to worry about

Nicky. Why shouldn't he move away if his mother wanted to?"

"I try to feel that way, Cara, but I suppose—oh well, we'll see what the Captain says. I'll be ready any time you are."

"About two," said Cara, and then they both saw Dora waiting on the porch—waiting with a letter in her outstretched hand.

CHAPTER XIX

NEWS FROM NICKY

"I THOUGHT you'd never come," grumbled Dora, holding the letter expectantly towards Barbara. "Here."

"Why Dora, you didn't have to stand waiting for me just because a letter came, did you?" Babs could not refrain from that much of a rebuke.

"Oh, no, of course I didn't," sighed Dora. "But that's me, always worrying about other folks' business."

"What is there to worry about?" again Babs questioned. She was purposely holding that soiled envelope without attempting to open it. The scrawl on its flap was positive proof that the message, whatever it might be, was sent by Nicky.

"Worry about?" repeated the maid sourly. She was watching furtively and, there wasn't a doubt of it, she expected to find out what was in that letter. "The way them Eytalians run around this place——"

"What Italians?" asked Babs impatiently. She too was anxious to know what was in the letter, but she had no idea of opening it just then.

"Them children, that old Nick, or what ever it is you call him. He raced up that path——"

"Running?"

"Runnin'?" Dora would repeat every word. "'Course not, runnin', but on an old forlorn bicycle that he let drop right on my cucumber vines."

"That's too bad," said Babs meaning it.

"And it's no easy job to raise cucumbers and keep them from the bugs, let alone to get a cuke off them, and then have some one 'bust' in and destroy them." Dora was mad.

Barbara was on her way upstairs now, but she turned around sharply.

"Did he really destroy your cucumber vine, Dora?" she asked sharply.

"No, he didn't. Do you think I'd be fool enough to let him? But it wasn't his fault. I just caught him in time. And I guess I gave him a piece of my mind that he won't forget in a hurry——"

But Barbara didn't wait for all that. She was in her room, the little brass bolt slipped across the door, and she was now opening the letter.

Scrawled over the front was the address:

"Miss Barbara Hail" . . . She laughed at that, "Hail", she repeated. "I'll have to show that to Cara."

And like one so anxious to learn something that he dreads to know, she was hesitating. Finally she thrust a nail file under the much befingered envelope flap and took out the page of old-fashioned, heavily lined paper. She read: "Dear Friend, Wear goin' away, gotta go. I'll tell you later. I didn't steal the boat, and can't tell you that either just now. Thank you, Nickolas Marcusi Junior."

"He didn't steal the boat! I knew he didn't," she rejoiced. "Oh, I am so glad——"

Again and again she read the scrawled, badly spelled lines. But he didn't steal the boat and that was all she cared about.

Instinctively she went over to her dressing table, pulled out the small drawer in which she kept all her best beloved letters, and was about to place Nicky's welcome news in there, when she looked again at the dirty smudges upon the paper.

"But it's precious," she decided, taking a clean plain envelope from her own box and slipping the other into it. Then she placed the newest addition to her important collection in with the others.

What a weight had suddenly been lifted from her heart! She had not realized it was so heavy until it was gone, and now she felt so different, so happy, so light hearted! She would almost have told Dora the news, only, of course, Dora would not have understood it.

But she must tell Cara at once. Down to the telephone she flew, and in a way that only she and Cara could have understood, she promptly managed to transmit the wonderful news.

"And I must go over to Miss Davis just as soon as we can after lunch," she panted. "I knew he didn't," she repeated again, guarding her words so that no other listener than Cara could have understood them.

"I never thought so either," Cara was answering. "Yes, I'll call for you early. Good-bye, I'm awfully glad."

But the girls were so rejoiced to receive those scant, scrawled words, that they had not realized how little they could really mean to any one but themselves. Nicky said he hadn't stolen the boat and that was enough for Barbara, but who else would believe him? Would Miss Davis?

And he had plainly intimated that he knew all about it being stolen; how did he know that? And why couldn't he tell why they had moved away so secretly?

Just a glimmer of this phase of the situation slowly devolved upon Babs, as she flew about happily, taking up her tasks which she had so suddenly allowed to accumulate. Even her room had not been made up, when Miss Davis came early that morning with the bad news. But now Babs was fixing things up, without really knowing she was doing anything. It was no trouble at all to straighten her row of books—they always seemed to fall over without having been touched—and she even dusted the mirror and the hand mirror, folded her towels. Oh, she could do anything now, she felt so much better.

But how did he know that model had been stolen?

Babs took the letter from the drawer and read it again, as if she could thereby penetrate the mind that had written those words.

"Can't tell you that either just now," she read after having read the previously written sentence, about his not having stolen the boat. And she wondered and wondered why he couldn't tell? Why could he not have dropped a hint? But, of course, he must have been in a great hurry, and it was good of him to make that attempt to reach her, Barbara tried to satisfy herself.

"One would think I had stolen the old boat," she laughed ever so lightly. "And imagine the girls thinking that we would want to adopt a little Italian boy! How quaint! as Lida would say," and Barbara's thoughts raced from one end of the subject to the other, but never did they seem willing to take up a different subject.

At lunch Dr. Hale had something to say.

"Do you know, Babs," he began gently, "that you have been neglecting me?"

"Why, Dads!" she exclaimed, affection pouring out with the words.

"Yes. You know I suggested that you dig up something for *us* to show in that fair, or whatever it is you are holding, and I haven't heard a word about your digging."

"I know, Dads," Barbara replied quickly. "But I've been—so busy." She was very meek now.

Dora's faded eyes were alive enough to flash her a significant challenge at that, but Babs pretended not to have seen.

"Oh, I know you have been busy," her father agreed. "But you see, Babs dear, *we* should be represented. So I got up there in the attic myself this morning, and *I* found something," he proclaimed proudly.

"You did, Daddy? What?"

"You shan't know until you have finished your lunch. You ought to eat that nice fresh egg," he reminded the girl who had pushed the egg aside.

"I don't think it is fresh, that is not very fresh," Babs stated. "But I don't care for eggs anyhow," she added.

"Not fresh?" Dora was on hand now, "Why they've just came," she declared, as if her kitchen pride had been greatly insulted.

"Don't we get any more from Babs' little Michael Angelo?" the doctor asked playfully, meaning Nicky, of course.

"No," Babs answered. "Nicky's folks have moved away," she felt constrained to add.

And that brought on a discussion into which Dora forced her opinions. Dr. Hale was not very much interested, but he tolerated the others as they hit back and forth in their retorting remarks, for Dora could not be expected to speak pleasantly of the "Eytalians."

Not that the maid was always disagreeable; indeed she was not. She was as "good as gold," almost always. Even Barbara would be glad to testify to that. But what "riled her" was Barbara stooping to bother with those foreigners.

But finally Babs arose from the table, and the doctor followed.

"What did you find in the attic, Dads?" she begged to know, as arm in arm they went, as they did after every meal however humble, into the sitting-room.

"Guess?" he teased.

"Oh, how could I?" murmured the girl. She gave his arm an extra tug and fell upon the arm of his big chair as he dropped into it.

"Well," he drawled, just to tantalize her, "it's small and it's square——"

"A little footstool, the worsted embroidered one?" she guessed.

"Nopy. It's something to hang up."

"An old picture, of course. I knew we had some Currier and Ives prints," she continued, "and I should have looked them up. Where did you hide it, Dad?"

"Not a picture, dear, but what they called a sampler. I suppose it means a sample-er because it's made up of sample letters."

"A sampler? Really Dad! Where is it?" Babs demanded impatiently. "I have never seen one in the attic."

"Well, it was there. In an old trunk; the one with the hobbed-nail cover, you know. But you don't spend as much time in the attic as I imagine some girls do, Babby. Guess your old dad keeps you too busy with his bugs," the doctor murmured.

"You don't either Dad. *Where* is that sampler?"

"Just give me a chance and I'll get it," the doctor answered, as if he had not had plenty of chance.

But at last he left his chair and went over to the old walnut bookcase. From the bottom, where the stained-glass door hid the big shelves, he drew out the old heirloom.

"It was your great-great grandmother's," he told his daughter, "and it's pretty old. I wonder it hasn't fallen apart," he reasoned, as he held the little mahogany frame at arm's length for his daughter's inspection.

"How quaint!" she exclaimed, without realizing she was using the term the girls always joke Lida about. "Isn't it finely embroidered?"

"I thought you would like it," her father said, a ring of satisfaction in his tone. "Well, I was talking to David Hunt this morning, our honorable mayor you know, and he's all keyed up over your Community House show. He says there isn't a doubt but the place will be given to the borough now. I guess Mary-Louise Trainor knew what she was doing when she started her Old Home Week. She got all the women interested with their patchwork quilts," the doctor chuckled, "and then she got you girls busy.

What this old beach doesn't know about heirlooms and family skeletons when the show is over won't be worth knowing," he finished jokingly.

But Barbara was looking intently at the sampler. So this had been the delicate handwork of the great-great grandmother. The faded silks and worsteds still held enough color to show the glory that had been woven into the letters, the symbols, and the flaring peacock.

"And I hate to sew or embroider," Barbara said aloud, "so I guess I don't take after grandmother. Here's her name in the corner. 'Mary Nelson, age 16 years 1831,' " she read. "That's almost one hundred years ago."

"Yes. The Nelson's were proud old stock, Babs," her father told her. "And I always thought you were about one hundredth of one per cent Nelson," he laughed. "But go get slicked up. I'm going over to that show myself this afternoon, and we can both take the sampler. I promised Dave Hunt I'd look in, and he asked me to be there at two-thirty this afternoon. Seems he expects some other old settlers to go there and greet the ladies, and he wants to include me."

"Oh, that will be fine," said Barbara, feeling that it wouldn't be anything of the kind. For proud as she was of her professional father, and glad and happy as she might be to bring that sampler to the Community House, she had other plans for the afternoon. She was going out with Cara to Miss Davis' house to tell her that Nicky hadn't stolen the ship. After that they were both going down to the lighthouse to see Captain Quiller, and they hoped he might know something of the Marcusis' whereabouts.

But how could Barbara refuse to go to the Community House with her father when he was so sure she would be delighted to go?

He saw her hesitate. "Unless you have some better plans," he said then. "If you have, of course——"

"Nothing could be better than going with you, Dad," she told him, "but I did promise to go—some place with Cara."

"Oh, that's all right, of course," the doctor quickly replied. "I'm always glad to have you go any place with Cara," he added. "She's a fine girl and she has done you a heap of good." He ran his hand under her chin at that, in a way he had of bringing her face up to look into his own.

"You're better this afternoon," he continued. "Thought you had something on your mind this morning but I see it's all right now," he ended, in that unerring way some fathers and all mothers seem to possess. "Then, you'll turn in the sampler, of course?" he questioned. "It wouldn't look just the thing for a doctor of bacteriology to contribute, would it?"

"Certainly I'll take it, Dad. And I'll get there before you leave, I hope," said Barbara, feeling guilty that she was failing him in his laudable pride, while she was following her own selfish interest in trying to ferret out the suspicion that had fallen upon an obscure Italian boy.

She knew it wasn't just being generous to Nicky; that her interest in him was a gratification of her love of adventure.

And she realized again that as a girl she was—different.

CHAPTER XX

FIGHTING IT OUT

As might have been expected Cara went into ecstasies over the old sampler.

"You ought to bring it right in," she counselled Babs. "They'll have a real honest-to-goodness opening this afternoon with speeches and all, and you should have the Nelson sampler there for folks to inspect. Besides, Babs," she pointed out, "it was so wonderful of your father to unearth it. He's a perfect peach," she went on, without once taking her brown eyes off the little framed sampler she was holding.

"And I feel like a criminal not to have gone in the old show with him," Babs confessed. "Oh, Cara," she exclaimed impatiently, "haven't I been an idiot?"

"Well, maybe," agreed her chum laughingly, "but you're a different sort of idiot from the common garden variety. Let's go. Where to? Want to peek in and see if the old Davis twin is still breathing?"

"I think I had better," demurred Babs.

"Surely she'll believe Nicky is innocent. But suppose she shouldn't?"

"Well, if you ask me," remarked Cara, in that funny way she had of saying slangy things prettily, "I'd say she surely will believe him guilty. She's got to have somebody guilty because the boat is gone, you know," Cara finished, sagely.

"Oh, yes; I know that," agreed Babs, "but it isn't Nicky."

"I hope not," Cara answered her briefly.

They drove along the sea-shore road, both silent for a few moments. This was unusual for these two girls, who always had so much to say to each other, but both were very busy thinking.

Presently they sighted the little house which made a home for the Davis twins. It was quaint, and had a row of latticed rose-bushes in front where every body else kept their porch, and the porch was a side "stoop," square and comfy looking. The Misses Davis were known for their good taste, and the inherited boat model may have favorably influenced it.

Babs jumped out of the car. "Doesn't seem to be any one around," she remarked as she left Cara.

No one was at home, they soon found out, and after vain attempts to get a response for her knocks, Babs returned to the car.

"I hope she isn't dead in there all alone," she remarked facetiously. She was anxious about the worried little woman, but not to the point so carelessly expressed.

"No danger. Only the good die of lost boat models," Cara said, keeping up the feeble joke. "We can go right over to the Community House now, can't we?"

"I suppose so," sighed Barbara. "But I wish I could get a word in with Miss Davis. She may go talking around, and you see, she couldn't mention Nicky's name without mentioning mine."

"That is a nuisance," her friend agreed. "Did you tell your father?" Cara asked suddenly.

"No."

"You didn't?"

"No. It is about the first thing of importance that I have ever kept from him, too. Makes me feel guilty," Babs confessed. "Let's go down to the old show and I'll deliver the grandmother fancy work. That ought to help," she tried to joke, but there was little mirth in the effort.

A line of cars blackened the edge of the road as the girls came upon the scene.

"Folks getting here early," said Cara. "You better hurry in with the sampler, Babs, or you won't find a spare nail left to hang it on. Oh, there are the girls!" she exclaimed, for the other girls were waiting outside the strip of land that was too near the ocean to grow good grass, so it really could not be called a lawn. "Hello there!" she called to them.

They waved in answer and still waited. They were Louise, Esther and Lida; Ruth was not with them.

Both Cara and Barbara noticed how they waited; that they did not run towards the car as they usually did. Neither remarked this, but they both understood. Then, as Barbara was almost up to the group, and Cara was a few steps back of her, she saw what the girls meant.

They were not very keen on greeting her!

They were actually holding back from speaking to her, slighting her and ignoring her.

Cara must have seen this also, for she sprang into the embarrassing gap as she was sure to do.

"Think we were not coming?" she asked cheerfully.

"No, we weren't worrying," Louise said very, very evenly. "We are not going to be on the girls' committee any more, so we just waited to tell you." She said this to Barbara but was too constrained to use Barbara's name. Every word seemed icy cold.

"Why, what's the matter?" Barbara asked, naturally.

"Oh, nothing much," evaded Louise, "but I for one don't care to serve on the committee." Her lip was curled in unmistakable scorn, and the other girls, while saying nothing, were looking just as Louise looked, disdainful.

"Did anything happen?" Cara asked, for once unable to laugh off trouble.

"Well, yes there did," Esther condescended to reply. "Miss Davis came around here just as *we* came. She said lots of mean things about the girls' committee not watching things, and we're not going to take any of that stuff," scoffed Esther. "We don't have to."

"Watching things? What's gone?" Barbara asked, she had to find out whether or not the girls knew about the boat model; of course, she feared they did.

"Miss Davis wouldn't say just what," Louise answered. "But *something* has been stolen. The idea! Just as if we could have or should have been around here early in the morning. Come on girls, I'm going," she finished crisply, and with an unmistakable look towards Barbara. She did achieve a little smile when Cara looked her way, however. They always favored Cara.

"Of course, go if you want to," flared back Babs. "There's no reason why you shouldn't. But if anything is stolen I can't see why it would be blamed on—us," she declared. She was going to say "blamed on you" but she changed it to include herself.

"Well, she did blame us and you're chairman so I suppose you'll have to fight it out with her." Again Louise avoided using Babs name as she said this.

"Of course it's that little Italian that tags around after you." Esther put in. "And Miss Davis says she'll clap him in a reform school if she lays her eyes on him," was the way Esther wound that up. Just as if the reform school should include Babs, if justice were really doled out according to Esther's ideas.

Babs was too indignant to answer. She stood there, digging her slippers into the sand and biting her lip. Her face was white and set in strained lines, and she knew, herself, that if she spoke just then she would say something that she might regret.

So she swung around sharply and left the girls, Cara standing there with them.

Crowds were coming in now, and she, Barbara Hale, who had been chosen to head the girls' work was being left alone, to her own resources and misery, and the women, and even the mayor, perhaps, would talk to her about all they had done, praise their work. How absurd!

She hoped her father wasn't there. That would add to her humiliation. And even more than this, she hoped Miss Davis was nowhere about.

"The Italian boy who always tags after me," she thought bitterly. "Yes, that's it. Those girls won't have anything to do with me or anyone else unless we keep away from——"

She couldn't say the word that was already upon her lips. She couldn't call the poor "scum." That would have been beneath her. But in her anger she could not help blaming the girls for their narrowness.

Why could they not have stuck together and proved to Miss Davis that harmony was always reliable?

Her white face burned now and her eyes felt sightless, as she entered the house. How devastating anger can be? How it poisons, and how it hurts!

"Those snobs!" she was thinking. "Cutting me like that. They were glad of a chance, of course. As if I cared."

But she did care, a lot. She was so indignant she could not direct her thoughts. She just couldn't think straight.

Entering the room she immediately espied her father.

"Daddy!" she called out. "I've brought our heirloom. Come along while I give it to the chairman."

Her father clutched her arm contentedly. And Babs was, as always, immensely proud of him. He did not "mix up much" according to popular opinion, but he was always to be depended upon when anything educational was astir.

Babs was dragging him along through the crowd. Folks were smiling and bowing to them, for everybody knew, or knew of, Dr. Winthrop Hale.

"Here, over here, Dad," marshalled Barbara, as gaily as she could manage to be.

She gave one vigorous push through a close tangle in the crowd, and emerged in front of the chairman; she had been going after the hat she recognized as belonging to Mrs. Frederick Winters.

And standing with Mrs. Winters was little Miss Davis. She was so short Barbara could not have seen her until she was right alongside of her.

For a moment Babs felt too panicky to speak. And what could she say with her father standing there smiling? His hat in his hand made him look quite professional, Babs knew, for it was a soft gray hat and he carried it like the gentleman he was.

But Miss Davis!

"Oh, Miss Davis!" burst out Babs without knowing she was going to. "Just see what we have brought. Daddy found it in the attic." She was chattering like a squirrel. "Isn't it wonderful? My great-great-grandmother Nelson's!"

"Nelson's!" exclaimed Miss Davis. "Nelson of Massachusetts! Why Dr. Hale! You don't tell me you are related to Mary Nelson?"

"My great-grandmother, Madam," said the doctor proudly, bringing the gray hat in and out suavely.

"And my great-grandmother's first cousin! There! I knew there was some bond between us, Barbara!" Miss Davis declared excitedly, getting hold of Barbara's arm and squeezing it with more vigor than might have been expected, even after Babs had felt the first decided squeeze.

"Oh, how wonderful!" trilled the girl. Her exclamation had a twofold meaning, and one fold applied to her relief that the other matter was not being brought up before her father.

"Now let those girls cut," she was thinking. "I guess I can have some friends of my own, and relations even. Think of it! An enemy, one to be feared, to turn out some precious relation. All through a faded old sampler!"

The relief was like the snapping of a string somewhere in Babs' make-up, for she would have danced around if there had been room. As it was, she couldn't budge without stepping on somebody's feet.

Her father and the chairman, Mrs. Winters, were quickly engaged in conversation, and the sampler was in the chairman's hands when Babs managed to drag Miss Davis away.

"I must speak to you," she whispered, timidly.

"Did you get it?" breathed Miss Davis hopefully.

"No; but I know something about it."

"Oh, do you!"

Instantly Barbara regretted the way she had said that. Miss Davis thought "knowing something about it" would mean much more than it did.

They finally reached a spot where they could speak privately, without being overheard.

"What is it?" begged Miss Davis.

"He, Nicky, didn't take it," Babs answered quickly.

"Then who did?"

"I don't know. He says in a note he wrote me that he couldn't tell just then. Of course he will when I see him."

Miss Davis's face dropped like a faded flower falling from its stem.

"My dear child," she murmured, "this is awful. I felt sure you had recovered it, you were so cheerful."

"But I am sure now that you will get it," insisted Barbara. "I know I can depend upon Nicky, and if it hadn't been for Father wanting to fetch in the sampler this afternoon I might have found him. But you see," she pointed out affectionately, "I really couldn't disappoint Dad. He so seldom takes an interest in things like this."

"Yes, you couldn't disappoint a man like your father, Barbara. He's one of Nature's noblemen," Miss Davis declared fervently. "And I'm simply delighted to find that we can claim a relationship." Her faded eyes sought Barbara's and they tried to smile, but her lips, her mouth merely twitched. She was suffering in her anxiety.

Instinctively Barbara put out her hand and pressed the slender fingers, that seemed so nervously restless upon the silken cord gathering in the little lady's bag.

"I'm so sorry about it, Miss Davis," Barbara murmured, "but I'm perfectly sure it will be all right. There's something we can't even guess, some reason why we can't find it. But I'm sure it's safe or Nicky would never have written the note the way he did."

"What did he say?" asked Miss Davis in a very tiny voice.

Babs told her. She dwelled upon the especial significance of every meager word.

"And you see, Miss Davis," she pointed out, "Nicky is really very wise. He has had to learn such a lot in those few years of his, that he's as wise as a boy much older."

"Yes; I can understand that," assented the other. "But—he may be wayward."

"Oh, he isn't really." Barbara was thinking of the girls and their hateful gossip about a reform school. "He just does everything for his mother," she said jerkily. "And he's the best boy——"

"I was speaking to Mr. Thornton confidentially this morning," Miss Davis said. "You know he has charge of wayward children——"

"But Nicky isn't wayward, not a bit," defended Babs, nervously.

"Well, I hope not. But Mr. Thornton said it was best for such children to be where they would *have* to learn right from wrong——"

"Oh, Miss Davis! But Nicky knows!" Babs gasped a little too loud, for folks around her turned sharply to see why any one would be so excited.

"The mayor is speaking," said a voice like vinegar right into Barbara's surprised right ear.

Her silence then was resolute.

CHAPTER XXI

BRIGHTER BUT NOT QUITE CLEAR

So that was what the girls meant when they spoke of the threatened reform school. Miss Davis had not burst out in anger, as Babs had imagined she might have done. How different things were after all. Perhaps it was foolish to get so excited. But the girls seemed so hateful. That was what hurt so. They just enjoyed cutting her, Barbara was quickly thinking, and in doing so she was again building up a wall of imagination that might be all wrong; just as she had been wrong about the reform school.

It had been a wonderful opening at the Community House. Speeches were made by many prominent men and women interested in the development of the Community House plan, and of course, a tribute had been paid to the girls' part in the affair. Best of all Barbara Hale stood there, right beside her proud father, and heard her own name called out as a most efficient young chairman. There was some satisfaction in that.

How much that made up for! Barbara hadn't realized that she cared until the glory was being all swept away, when the girls threatened to resign. But all the same, she saw them there now with Cara as cheer leader, and they did clap their hands in the applause that followed the calling out of her name. So perhaps they were sorry for their spite. She was glad of that too. Another surprise for her. Miss Davis stood beside her and had her kindly arm around Barbara's waist. This, no doubt, had helped change the girls' opinion. Or maybe it wasn't changed either way, as she had feared.

Well, at any rate, things looked brighter. The family sampler was placed among the things to be selected in the final issue of prizes, and none of the other girls had brought any heirlooms in. Cara talked of loaning a very old Chinese print, but she decided it might not be understood so she didn't bring it in after all.

"Might think the laundry man gave it to us for Christmas," she joked when Babs urged her to fetch it. "No, I don't think I will. It wouldn't jibe in with Mrs. Brownell's early American table." This of course had become the standard joke of the entire exhibit. The table set the style. If it didn't go with the table it wouldn't go with the show, was the way Cara argued, humorously.

So that Babs had fared very well after all, and she cared because her father cared. Now folks would not speak of her as a girl deprived of a girl's pleasures, because she had to help her father in his laboratory work.

Everything was bustle and confusion when Cara slipped around through a little pantry door, came up the back way, and grabbed Barbara.

"It's all right," she whispered. "The girls are all over their huff. We shouldn't have kept them so long waiting. That's enough to make anybody mad."

"Oh, I don't care," Babs answered, somewhat truthfully for she was feeling very brave now. "We've finished our work, anyway. The women will take charge now."

"But you're not going to—to keep it up, are you Babs?" asked Cara, anxiously.

"You mean—the scrap?"

"Yes. Really, they are sorry."

"They ought to be," Babs retorted. "Why should they blame me?"

"Oh, you know what kids they are," laughed Cara. "Come on. I'm going for a soda. I'm choked. Come along. Want to fetch your daddy?"

"I guess he's riding with Mr. Hunt," Babs answered. "Let's go. I'm smothered," and bidding a quick good-bye to the newly found relation, Miss Isabel Davis, Barbara hurried along with Cara.

The soda was refreshing. They sipped it leisurely in Hills, both girls a little tired and one girl, Babs, a little anxious.

"If only old Captan Quiller knows where Nicky may have gone," she said, "I feel positive we will be able to clear everything up. Wherever do you suppose the old model went to, anyway?" she asked again, for the question was constantly recurring to her.

"If I could guess that," Cara answered, "I would be smart. Look who's coming!" she broke off suddenly. "There's Dud and Glenn."

" 'Low there!" sang out Cara's brother as he espied them. "Where on earth did you two hail from? I had an idea you were in Europe or some such town. Haven't seen you——"

"For a month of blue moons," Babs supplied. "Hello Glenn! Where have *you* been? Forgotten where Dr. Hale lives?" she joked, for her friend Glenn had rather deserted her lately.

"Nopey. I haven't. But you girls are always so goshed busy a fellow doesn't dare bust in," Glenn replied. "Have more soda, or a lolly-pop or sumthin'? Just to be sociable, do," he urged, for the girls had pushed their almost empty glasses aside.

"Couldn't possibly," Cara answered.

"Nor I," declared Babs. "The best I could do to oblige would be to accept a box of nice two-toned writing paper, Glenn; that is if you insist, of course."

"Well, we'll get to the writing paper after the soda," Glenn replied dryly. "How do you like our new coats of tan? Dud has had me out at dawn running up and down the beach, training you know," he explained. The girl with the paper cap, and gingham apron, and cheerful smile had taken the boys' order. She must have loved to serve soda the way she smiled at those boys.

They joked and chatted until Babs wondered if the hour planned for her visit to the lighthouse would be all used up, there at Hills. It was pleasant to meet the boys again, and they were going to camp, a military training camp, late in the summer, so that they too had much to talk about. But she could not spare the time.

Glenn and Dudley had become great friends; just as great as Babs and Cora; that was evident.

"And oh, say!" sang out Dudley suddenly. "Know what?"

"No, what?" answered Babs punning on his exclamation.

"Our little Nicky brought me the corkingest little wooden mug, all carved in queer birds and little beasties——"

"When?" interrupted Babs eagerly.

"When what? Birds or beasties?" asked Dudley.

"Oh, when did he bring them, silly?" Cara asked her brother. She understood Babs' eagerness.

"Well," drawled Dudley, as a boy will when he knows a girl is anxious, "to be exact——" He looked at his watch.

"Please tell me when he came, Dud?" Babs asked frankly. "I've lost track of Nicky and I must find him."

"Oh; that's different," replied the boy. "Well, he came this morning while Glenn and I were knocking up some wonderful tennis. He crawled through the hedge and I imagine he swam the brook. He looked just about like something that had swum a brook when the brook was being swept out. He can look too funny, that youngster."

"Did he say anything about having moved?" Barbara asked impatiently.

"Nary a word. But say, Babs, they don't

move, they flit, like the birds. And a good thing too. Lucky dogs! Everybody ought to flit instead of moving. Remember when we last moved, little sister?"

"Oh, forget it," answered Cara. "Don't try to remember it. But say Dud, listen. *Where* has Nicky flitted to? That's the great question."

"How should I know? He just plunked the wooden thing under my nose and I plunked a dollar bill in his fist, and there you are!" Dudley could be brief and expressive at times.

"Let's go, Cara," urged Babs. "I really must go, you know," she insisted.

"Oh, say," interrupted Glenn. "Who was going to eat that box of writing paper? Call the waiter. Here!" this was to a boy who stood grinning behind the counter. "Where's your best stationery——"

"If you are going to treat us, Glenn," Cara cut in, "let's select our own. Do, please. Come along Babs. We'll teach him not to be rash. We'll buy the very best," and laughingly, she led Babs to the pretty glass counter in the very back of the store where all sorts of attractive things in stationery and powder boxes were gaudily displayed.

A little later, armed each with a magazine that Dudley insisted upon buying them, and the goldedged blue-lined writing paper that Glenn gladly paid for, they finally made their escape.

"Do let's rush along," begged Babs. "We must get to the lighthouse before supper-time and I suppose they eat at six o'clock sharp, government time," she suggested gaily. "Oh, Cara, I am feeling better every minute, aren't you?"

"Yes, it's the soda, the writing paper and the magazine. All cheerful little things," Cara answered, starting her car. "But say, Babby, did you have any sort of inspiration when Dud told about *more* wood carving?"

"No, Cara, why?" asked Babs, breathlessly.

"I did."

"You did. What?"

"I thought maybe, just maybe you know, that the boat model was borrowed for a model."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You are not usually so stupid, Babby dear," sighed Cara. "Can't you see? It wouldn't really be stealing if friend Nicky took the little boat for some one to copy, would it?"

"Cara!"

"Now, would it?"

"Not stealing," said Babs slowly. "But *who* would want to copy it?"

"Stupid again. Whoever does the beautiful carving, of course."

"Oh." Babs fell into silence after that. She had not thought of such a possibility and it sort of staggered her.

"Copy the model?" she said finally.

"Why not?" pressed Cara. "It was worth copying, wasn't it?"

"It certainly was. Cara, you're a wonder. I never would have thought of such a thing," Babs declared still a little jerky.

"Oh, yes, you would. I didn't give you time. But don't build your hopes too high, dear. I may be all wrong," drawled Cara.

"I hope you're all right," said Babs fervently. Then she stared hard ahead, as the car cut its way through the heavy sand. She was wondering. Nicky said he hadn't taken the model—no, he said he hadn't stolen it.

"And wasn't it queer," Cara broke in on her thoughts, "that he, Nicky, should fetch Dud another piece? Whoever cuts those out must be an expert," she promptly decided.

"Yes," said Babs abstractedly.

"And Nicky's like Hop-o-My-Thumb," she added. "We just about get on his track when he—hops."

"Yes," said Babs again.

"If I said you were handsome would you say yes, Babs?"

"Yes," said her companion. Then they both burst out laughing.

"I knew I'd catch you. Well, you're not handsome, not when you pucker up your forehead that way, anyhow. Now, here we are on our way to the lighthouse, and here's where we get out and walk," she went on. "I suppose we'll have to wait until morning if the captain is trimming his lamp," she finished, locking her car and then following Babs through the deep sand to the little path that led along the beach to the lighthouse.

A big, shaggy, friendly dog rushed out to them.

"Captain in?" Babs asked the dog.

"Whoo-of!" barked the animal playfully, licking Babs hand as an after thought.

"Yes, he's in," said Cara. "I see his foot. See it sticking out there in the bushes?" she directed, for the porch of the lighthouse was surrounded by a stubby growth generously called bushes, and they could see the outlines of a shoe among them.

There was the scuffling of a chair as the girls reached the funny little home-made porch.

"Well, now," declared the captain moving in his chair but not rising. "Here you both are! How do? See, I've a game leg and can't get up," he explained. "Slipped on the third step the other night. Ouch!" he groaned as he moved the "game leg" unintentionally. "There ain't nuthin' worse," he declared still groaning.

"Hurt your foot?" Cara managed to say. "That's too bad, Captain. You need both your feet to climb up to the light."

"Don't I though? Find a place to sit down among those books. I've been readin' my head off, me and Mac" (he patted the dog affectionately) "and it's tough being stuck in a chair with a pretty sea like that rolling under your very nose."

"Yes, it must be," agreed Babs. "But Captain Quiller. I'm sorry to be in a hurry, but I have to be," she sort of apologized. "Can you tell me where Nicky has moved to?"

"Moved to? You mean flew to." (It was the same sort of expression Dudley had used.) "They've gone to the woods. Didn't you know?"

"To the woods!" both girls exclaimed.

"Yessir. And sensible thing to do too. The woods is just the place for them." And Captain Quiller brought his cane down so hard and so near his sore foot that he groaned anyhow, although he didn't touch it.

"Where? What woods!" demanded Barbara impatiently.

"Well, now. Not so easy to locate from here seein' as how it's some miles back. But he'll be here, Nicky will. He's my stand-by now," the captain declared proudly. "Depend more on him than I can on Pete. Yessir, Nick is some boy."

Barbara loved to hear him praise her little protégé. She didn't realize it, of course, but she was taking Nicky and his affairs to heart just as grown folks take protégés and their affairs.

"Couldn't we find their camp?" pressed Cara. "We really want to speak to Nicky just as soon as we can."

"By the time you would find him he would be due here likely," answered Captain Quiller. "Hope nothin's wrong?"

"No, not exactly," said Babs, "just a little mixed up."

CHAPTER XXII

WASHINGTON ANSWERS

"WE certainly are meeting difficulties," remarked Cara as they left the road to the lighthouse behind them. "Ruth would call them snags, difficulties are different, aren't they?"

"But imagine the Marcusis camping in the woods," said Babs, ignoring frivolity. "What did the captain say about some one being sick?"

"He didn't say it, he caught himself in time. Seems as if there's a mystery in that somewhere," said Cara more seriously.

"Why ever should there be a mystery in a person being sick? How silly!"

"Well, we'll soon know," Cara assured her. "You can count on Captain Quiller. We impressed him the night he scrambled in on my roof. Wasn't that too funny?"

"And we had on those absurd things!" Babs recalled. "You in your bridal robes!"

"And you in your college robes! Say Babs, I wish you would sell me that outfit," Cara said suddenly. "I'd love to wear it once in a while.

I never intend to go to college, you know," Cara admitted indifferently, "so I'd like to pretend I had been there."

"Sell it to you! You can have it, I don't want it. I always feel as if I do want to go to college—But then," Babs checked herself, "I may go to a special school for science. Dad says I have a scientific turn of mind," she declared, laughing heartily at the very idea.

"And now that you've gone in for heirlooms, samplers, etc., that proves it," remarked Cara dryly.

"And gone in for twin cousins. Do you suppose Miss Davis is a sort of shadowy cousin to me?" asked Babs.

"Shadowy anyhow. She's thin enough. But she's nice. If only we can lay hold of that miserable little Nicky and wring out of him the story of the boat model."

"Cara Burke!" exclaimed Babs, rebukingly. "You stop making fun of my adopted brother. Didn't you say I should adopt him?"

"Looks right now as if he would be the adopted son of Captain Quiller," went on Cara, for both girls were in that mood that made them feel like saying silly things and laughing at them, as if they were the very best jokes they had ever heard.

"I'm glad you have nothing more important to do than to drive me around, Cara," Babs remarked as she jumped out of the car. This was Babs' way of thanking her chum for her continuous attention.

"So am I," chirped Cara. "Think what fun I'd miss if I did have something more important to do."

But presently she was gone, and Babs was running up the little patched stone walk, a walk made of pieces of stone just scattered in the grass at step lengths, so that one always wanted to play a game as she raced along them. Babs called them her broken trail, and she always jumped hardest on the big pointed stone that looked like a gray shawl in the thick green grass.

She was almost happy. Things were promising to clear up. She and Cara were going to the lighthouse exactly at eight o'clock. It would still be daylight at that time, but Captain Quiller said Nicky would come then to light his lamp, so high up in the tower that the glow could be seen like a little candlelight's flicker, to warn seamen away from the dangerous point of sand. Once touching that sand-bar a craft would be aground, and the light was to mark this danger and save it from such peril.

Babs, hurrying on, had not quite reached the porch of her own home now, but she could plainly see the inescapable Dora standing waiting for her.

And she held another letter in her hand!

"What?" exclaimed Babs, ready to roar at the humor of it, "not another letter, Dora?"

"Yes," replied Dora solemnly, holding out a big envelope, "and it even hasn't a stamp on it. Marked 'official business.'" One would think it were a death notice the way Dora intoned that.

"Oh!" cried Babs grabbing the paper from her hands. "Quick, give it to me! I know——"

"Don't scratch me like that," snapped Dora. "Surely, your old Aunt hasn't died and left you that money——"

"What Aunt? What money?" Babs didn't know what she was saying, and she didn't care. She had the letter and was making tracks for the secrecy of her own room.

Poor Dora! Disappointed again! Barbara Hale was not the girl she used to be. There had been a time when she read her letters under Dora's very eyes. But now——

Up in her room Barbara was reading that letter from Washington, in a perfect spasm of excitement. The spasm kept her still, and she made her eyes read the words in spite of their rebellion. They wanted to blink, to wink, to flicker, to flirt with the words. Eyes will act like that when you press them too hard.

Babs was reading. And the "letter head" was from the secretary of the United States. It informed Miss Barbara Hale that her letter recommending Nickolas Marcusi for bravery had been received, and an account of the incident had been fully investigated. The little boy was certainly worthy of official commendation, the letter stated, for not only had he done a brave act and suffered physical pain in doing it, but he had set an example of bravery and nobility such as boys of this great country would do well to appreciate. "Therefore——"

Barbara stopped reading. She wanted to know it all so badly she just feared to find it out; she hated to have the secret a secret no longer. Raising her violet eyes to her ceiling, always such a homely ceiling but now seemingly heavenly, she drew in a sharp breath.

"Nicky!" she whispered ecstatically, "you do deserve it. You have worked so hard!"

Again she followed the precious words. Yes, Nicky would be recommended for bravery and the whole affair was to be brought to the attention of the President.

"The President!" cried out Barbara. "Hooray! Daddy! Dora! Listen!" and now the anxiously waiting maid was to hear the news at last.

"And Daddy isn't home yet! Oh, dear!" wailed the excited girl. "How shall I wait to tell him? Listen Dora."

"I'm listenin'," Dora reminded her dryly. "Whatever is it? Who's dead?"

"Dead? Who said any one was dead? It's Nicky——"

"What's happened to him now, Nick-kee," Dora was contemptuous.

"Now, if you sneer at him like that I'll not tell you a single word!" threatened Babs, her cheeks flaming indignantly

"Who's sneering, I'd like to know?" retorted Dora, just as if she didn't know already.

"Well," began Barbara, "when the government of the United States thinks a boy is good enough and brave enough to be noticed, it seems to me you and I," she added this last when she remembered the overdue wages, " you and I," she repeated emphatically, "should at least respect him."

"Yes," said Dora, and the word really meant no.

"Oh, all right, you don't need to bother," decided the excited one. "I'm in a hurry anyhow. I hope supper is ready. I'm starved too. I've got to phone Cara." She was going toward the phone.

"I can't see what good a fair is if you come home starved to death from it," snapped Dora. "Of course, your supper is ready. Am I ever late? Not that there ain't enough to hinder one——"

But Barbara was at the phone.

"Cara, Cara!" she could be heard to exclaim. "The most wonderful news! From Washington! About Nicky. Oh, do hurry around——"

"Yes, a letter. It was here when I came home. Oh, here comes Dads. I must tell him. See you in a few minutes? Yes, do hurry," and Babs banged the receiver on the hook and flew to the door.

Her father was just coming up the Trail but he didn't dance over the stones as Babs would have done. Yet, he too liked that distracting stone walk. One could never think of trouble when treading it; just stones. They demanded one's entire attention.

Babs swung herself around her father's neck—by her arms, of course—in a way she had not lately been indulging in.

"Oh, Daddykinks!" she gurgled, lips pressed to his kindly cheeks. "News from Washington. They answered my letter——"

"Of course they did. Why wouldn't they?" the doctor interrupted dryly. "Look who you are! Didn't you get proud at the Community House this afternoon?" He pressed her close to his mohair coat. "I did," he declared frankly. "With our sampler and our new relations——"

"But this. You see this isn't for us; it's for Nicky. And he hasn't anything else. Just sit down and read it," she begged. "Do daddy, please."

"That supper you was talking about is pretty well spoiled," put in the grouchy Dora. "And it isn't my fault. You understand that, I hope."

"Yes, we understand that and it's all right, thank you, Dora," spoke up the doctor authoritatively.

Then he and his daughter settled down deep into the big chair to enjoy the news from Washington.

CHAPTER XXIII

PROLONGING THE AGONY

A SMALL dark figure, like a queer sort of bug, could be seen at the top of the grating that supported Beacon Light. That was Nicky. The girls beneath were calling to him, Captain Quiller was shouting, but beyond meaningless little words dropped down through the spiral frame, no answer came to their entreaties.

They wanted him to come down. Captain Quiller insisted that the light was all right and that he should come down.

But he didn't. "In a minute," they heard him promise. "I just want to see what's the matter with this."

"With what?" demanded the captain. He was standing on that sore foot defiantly, and his cane didn't do much good either. "Ain't nothin' the matter with that light," he called up to the speck at the eye of the beacon. "Come on down here! Can't sleep up there, can you? Though he'd like to, first rate," the captain told the two impatient girls. "He's just daffy about that light."

But after repeated appeals, and a broad hint from Cara that she had good news for him, Nicky paid some attention.

"Good news?" he repeated. "What is it? Can't you fetch it up?"

"Fetch it up?" Babs repeated this. "Why should we?"

"So's you could see the light. It's a dandy, and they's steps. Come on up," he coaxed, leaning over the little railing expectantly.

"Can you beat that?" chuckled the captain. "Want's to show you the light. Well, you better climb up. It's the quickest way. No good news ain't goin' to get him down 'till he's ready to come. Take them steps. They're all right, only don't get dizzy," he warned them. They were already on their way.

It was fun to walk up the queer steps, and Babs led the way.

"I feel like a roof painter," joked Cara. "Where's our paint brushes and tin cans?"

But Babs was going straight up. She didn't pause to look out over the water as Cara was doing.

"Why don't you look?" Cara begged her. "Did you ever see such a wonderful view?"

"Haven't time for views," called Babs, for the noise of the ocean made calling necessary.

Finally, they both reached the top, and on the little platform they found Nicky. His eyes were dancing in his head, and he was so anxious to tell them everything about the light at once, that Babs despaired of getting his attention at all.

"We can see all this any time," she insisted. "Don't you see, Nicky, I have a letter from Washington," she began almost hopelessly.

"Yeah?" spoke the boy.

"About you."

"About me?" He was alarmed now. "What about me an' Washington?"

"Well, if you'll just climb down I'll tell you," promised Babs, determined to get him to a less distracting spot. "We'll go first, and you come right straight along."

Perhaps his alarm accounted for his final obedience, but at last he did condescend to come down.

And it was on Captain Quiller's porch that Babs unfolded her story. The setting, Cara thought, was like a scene in a play. The old captain in the funny old armchair with a telegraph-wire glass on each chair leg. Then Nicky—he looked like a picture that might have been found somewhere in Europe. He was picturesquely ragged, as Cara saw him. His brown skin toned in with the faded brown khaki garments he wore, his one suspender doing valiant duty across his small shoulder.

His hair was black and too long for a boy, but it curled up jauntily, and made the little fellow look quite handsome, both girls thought.

"You come here, son," the captain ordered. "You're worse than a grasshopper. Can't pin you down, nohow. There, you sit right here," he indicated the arm of the chair, and the boy awkwardly perched himself upon it.

Nicky's fear at anything official had now left him. He instinctively knew that there was nothing wrong. They wouldn't be smiling and happy had there been.

Babs tried to explain about the letter but it was hard work. Smart as the youngster was he couldn't understand why falling off a bicycle, with a can of kerosene oil, was anything to be proud of.

"But you saved the light from going out," Cara explained. "If the light had gone out in the storm, ships might have been wrecked and lives lost."

"And the *Laurania* was just off shore," spoke up the captain. "She's a millionaire's yacht and they carry quite a crew." He clapped his hand on Nicky's shoulder and it was easy to tell just how thick or thin the boy's old shirt was.

"Well, anyhow," Babs began again, "Washington has answered our letter and maybe you'll get a medal."

"A medal!" grinned Nicky. "What good is a medal?"

"Not much, son," agreed the captain, strange to say. "But then, it's a mighty good thing to have friends at Washington. There's all-powerful people there," and Nicky's shoulder again responded under Captain Quiller's fatherly pat. It whacked.

"Oh, I know!" gasped Babs. "I know—something."

"What? Don't choke on it. What is it?" asked Cara.

"Perhaps I shouldn't say it right out, but you know, we're all your friends, don't you Nicky?" she began cautiously.

"Sure." Nicky wasted no sentiment.

"Then, Captain Quiller, why couldn't we ask to get Nicky's father out? He never did a thing wrong."

"Betchure life he didn't," proclaimed the small son, loudly and emphatically.

"No, he didn't do it," confirmed Captain Quiller. "That's been a shame, that has." He avoided saying anything more definite, but they all knew he meant it had been and still was a shame to hold Nicky's father in jail.

"Then, don't you see?" gurgled Babs. She was too excited to be explicit. "Don't you see, that now Washington would listen to us and we could ask?"

"Who's Washington?" asked Nicky, quite practically.

"Oh, you know I mean the officials at Washington, of course," Babs answered petulantly.

"I think that's just a wonderful idea," declared Cara, jumping up to get nearer her chum. "Babs, you're too smart to live. Take care you don't die or something."

But Barbara Hale wasn't joking; she was very much in earnest, and in less time than she could have thought it all out, she and Captain Quiller had come to a decision.

Of course, Nicky and Cara got a few words in edgewise, but they were mostly very little words and didn't take long to say, for the way Babs and the old captain talked was simply prodigious.

"Aren't you happy? Aren't you glad, Nicky?" she demanded to know finally, for as a matter of fact the boy wasn't showing any enthusiasm at all.

"About what?" he wanted to know. Wasn't he tantalizing?

"That we're going to get your father home," Babs declared convincingly.

"How can you tell?" the boy cross-questioned.

"Oh, Nicky Marcusi!" exclaimed Cara quite angrily. "You're the queerest duck. Don't you see that Barbara has made the officials commend you, and they have her name on file and they'll read any letter she writes them? Then, as Captain Quiller says, they'll get a whole lot of signatures, and they'll investigate your father's case. Can't you understand that?"

Nicky had left the arm of the captain's chair and was playing with the dog's left ear. He raised his head now, dropped the dog's ear and looked at Barbara.

"I allus knowed you was smart," he said simply, "you kin tell fresh eggs just by touchin' them."

Every one roared laughing at that, but they understood what he meant. He meant that his first acquaintance with Barbara's cleverness came through his experience in the egg business. He brought her eggs to buy and she just took them in her hand and said:

"Yes, these are fresh."

That showed how smart she was, to Nicky.

So why shouldn't she make the Washington officials believe in his father's innocence after that? Surely one matter was as simple as the other, to a small boy.

"Well, son," said the captain, when he had stopped puffing over the joke, "since you don't care for medals we'll see what we can do for you in pardons."

"He don't have to be pardoned, because he didn't do anything wrong," cried the child indignantly. He always flared up when his father's trouble was mentioned.

"Well, that's so. But anyway we'll go ahead. Now girls, are you satisfied?" the captain wanted to know, for Babs and Cara plainly had something else to say.

"Oh, yes, Captain," Babs answered. "We really didn't come so much about the letter. You see, I only just now thought of—of Nicky's father," she confessed.

"I see," said Captain Quiller, expectantly. Then he waited.

"But there is something else," went on Babs. "I hadn't told *you* Captain, because I just didn't get a chance to."

"Things did pile up pretty quickly," he agreed. "Like a squall, when we wouldn't expect one," he chuckled. He always talked of the sea even when there was nothing to be said about it.

"Yes. But this is different. I'll have to ask Nicky." Barbara said this in apology to their host. "Nicky," she began as severely as she could. "I've got to know this very minute about that boat model. Where is it?"

"You can't," the boy answered crisply.

"But I've got to! I'm nearly crazy about it. Don't you know you're blamed for stealing it?" Babs blurted out.

"I told you I didn't."

Cara was whispering to the captain, so that they didn't once interrupt the other two.

"I know you told me," Barbara repeated, "but what good does that do? Miss Davis is almost sick in bed over it, and nobody, but you and me, knew where it was hid. Now *who* took it?"

"I can't tell you yet. But I will soon," the boy promised. This time he showed some feeling. He was plainly sorry not to be able to oblige this particularly good friend, by telling her how the boat model had disappeared.

"Soon?" exclaimed Cara, who could no longer keep quiet. "Don't you see, Nicky, that Barbara is really worried to death about that model?"

"But I promised. I got to keep a promise, ain't I, Cap?"

"Well, that depends on what sort of promise it was. If it was a foolish one——" the captain began.

"It wasn't. I got five dollars for it," declared the youngster, joyfully.

"You got five dollars for it! Five dollars for hiding somebody's—crime!" gasped Babs. "Oh, Nicky! How could you?"

" 'Twasn't either a crime. It's all right. You just have to wait, that's all. Today's Wednesday and you'll know Friday. What's the matter with that?" Nicky wanted to know.

"You don't seem to understand," pleaded Barbara, almost in despair. "I just have to know tonight. I promised Miss Davis I'd surely tell her tonight. Nicky, I'll give you five dollars to give back to whoever bought your promise. You shouldn't have taken money for a thing like that," she insisted.

"Why shouldn't I? We had to move, didn't we?" A boy is so literal he can never see why girls are sentimental.

"Now see here," spoke up the captain. "Let's see what's the trouble. You say a ship model was taken from the Community House?"

"Yes," answered both Cara and Babs.

"And Nicky knows who took it?"

"Sure I do," and the boy was actually smiling.

"And you promised not to tell 'till Friday?" the man continued.

"That's it," declared Nicky gladly. "I can tell Friday."

"And you know you're a government man now, Nick," the captain reminded him. "What you say you stick to. Understand that?"

"I allus do that," the boy spoke up a little saucily.

"That's the way to talk; fine," agreed the Captain. "Now, you'll say that ship model is safe, O.K.?"

"Cer-tain-ly." A long word for Nicky.

Captain Quiller looked at the girls whose faces were set with an impatient, anxious expression.

"Then, it seems to me," he said like a judge, "you girls will have to wait until Friday."

"Oh, how can we?" wailed Barbara. "Think of Miss Davis."

"When Bell Davis hears her *Santa Maria* is safe," said the seaman decidedly, "she'll be so glad she won't worry about anything else. I know Bell Davis and her ship model too," he finished, and so the girls were obliged to be content with that. But they were not content at all.

CHAPTER XXIV

SCOUTS IN THE WOOD

"You were wise, dear, not to press the boy further. I think he had about as much as a small boy's head could carry, as it was."

So spoke Dr. Hale to Barbara, late that night, after Barbara had told him the whole story of her complicated interest in Nicky and his family. She was sitting on the floor beside him, on the old braided rug, her head against his knee so that he might stroke it reassuringly.

"And you've forgiven me for not telling you before, Dads? You see, I knew you wouldn't want me to bother about such things, and I felt that once I did get into it I would have to go through with it," she explained. "But, you have no idea what a bother it has been. Whew!" She blew the word out explosively. "I feel like a Sherlock Holmes."

"Yes, it is surprising what difficulties some poor people have to struggle against and yet what fine characters they develop. If they don't get sour they are sure to remain permanently strong;

sort of a concentrated character, if you know what I mean," her father pointed out to her.

"Yes, I think I understand, sort of boiled down," she answered, laughingly.

"Exactly." And they both laughed over the illustration.

"But you see, Dad, I've got to find his mother and talk to her. I couldn't be satisfied with so small a boy's word on all this. Besides, there's her husband's pardon. I ought to talk to her about it, don't you think so?"

"Yes, decidedly. Nicky is clever enough but as you say, he's nothing but an ignorant little boy, and it wouldn't be right to trust too much to him," decided Dr. Hale.

"You see, I couldn't possibly say another word to him tonight after the Washington letter and the ship model and everything," went on Barbara seriously. "If I had so much as asked where their camp was, I'm sure he would have run away. He seemed to hate it all, as it was. Bashful you know, Dads," Barbara explained.

"Yes, he would be. But I guess you've made him happy, just the same," her father assured her. "To get that letter from Washington would have set some boys up proudly for the rest of their lives."

"Oh, you couldn't make Nicky proud," Babs declared. "You see, he's—boiled down." This expression had become Bab's special joke.

When they settled down to seriousness after that, it was decided that Babs and Cara should again visit the lighthouse and get from Captain Quiller what directions they could in hopes of finding the camp in the woods.

"And I'll go along with you," promised her father, "for a number of reasons."

But it was actually two days later before the all important trip could be made. The doctor had been called out of town, the captain had to have time to make sure he was divulging no secret that should have been withheld, and it took him a day to go out to the woods to see Mrs. Marcusi, as he could only leave his post at a certain hour of the afternoon. So Babs and Cara lived somehow, and Miss Davis was so relieved to be assured her model was safe, she really was, as Cara said, "quite sweet about it."

All week long the Community House "fair," as the exhibit was being called by the country folks, was in progress, and as Cara predicted, the girls' committee got together again and worked even more enthusiastically than at first.

It must be said in all fairness to Esther and Louise that they did all they could to make amends for their slight to Barbara. They explained quite frankly that their folks didn't want them to have anything to do with the foreigners, because, as Louise put it, "they didn't know anything about them."

This was not unreasonable, Cara made Babs see that, because summer folks have to be careful whom they associate with. Both Cara and Babs laughed over the foolish idea that summer folks had to be more carefully guarded than winter folks—those who lived at Sea Cosset the year around—but Babs was too busy with other and more important affairs to worry over such trifles.

Her heart was singing these days, because she was so expectant. Something wonderful was about to happen. She was going to find out who carved the beautiful wooden candlesticks, and why Nicky's folks were afraid of being known to strangers. This would surely satisfy her thirst for adventure.

"I feel just as if it were the day before Christmas," she told Cara, "and I was waiting for Santa Claus."

"I feel as if it were the day after Christmas," Cara put in, "and that he had brought me a bag of golden promises."

So the girls flitted from their homes to the Community House, gaily helping the ladies with the dusting and rearranging of the articles still left to be voted upon later; and it was all good fun.

Mrs. Brownell's table was awarded first prize, it had to be or she would have gone to bed with nervous prostration. But it really was a fine antique. As to quilts——

"They won't get them all decided upon before the holidays," Ruth Harrison declared, "and maybe they'll have to hold another Old Home Week to give the prizes then."

The smaller articles, in which class Babs' sampler had been placed, were to be voted upon on the very last day, Saturday, and Miss Davis wondered about her model.

"You see," she confided, "I expect sister home Friday, that's tomorrow night. And if ever I lay my eyes on that little boat again I don't think I'd risk taking it out of the house. Sometimes I'm just as worried as ever——"

"I'm sure it's safe," Barbara told her again, for times beyond counting, "and maybe you could get it in the contest after all," she cheered the little lady.

"I'd love to. It is so handsome! Well, you've done your best and I'm getting more fond of you every day," declared the dainty little Miss Davis, with a pardonable show of affection for her little sampler relation.

Barbara loved that feeling of relationship, however remote it was, for she had been much alone since her Aunt Katherine moved away out West, and there was after that no woman but the well-meaning Dora to offer her protection. It was all well enough to be considered different from other girls, to have her father tell her gallantly that she was almost as good as a boy, to have boys call her a pal and a chum and flatter her in their favorable comparisons, not a bit like other girls; but a girl needs a woman's sure arm around her; sometimes.

She wants to be told she just must not do things she insists upon doing. In a word she cannot comfortably carry all her own responsibility. And Barbara knew this well. She had tried it out and found the way very lonely. It would be such fun now to have the Twinnie Davises to run to. Cousins, she would call them of course.

It so happened that this was the week that Dudley Burke and Glenn Gaynor left for camp. So much always happens in the late summer. The night before they left the boys took all the girls out, *all* the girls that the girls could gather up. And they had a wonderful time, from sodas at Hills, to movies at the Ritz, after which delightful hours were spent upon the porch of a Monmouth hotel, where the party too young and too informal to take part, listened to the orchestra and watched the dancing, from the great ocean-front porches. In a few more years they might take part in this, but just this summer Mrs. Burke was acting as chaperon and they were glad to be allowed to look on. Otherwise the party might not have remained so late on the wonderful hotel porch; that is, they could not have done so but for the all important chaperonage.

Friday morning came at last, and they were going in search of that camp in the woods.

"I'm so thrilled," Cara confessed, "I can hardly breathe. I think I have real heart disease."

"Not exactly heart disease," said Dr Hale, "but curiosity illness. It has a choking habit."

Babs, Cara, and Dr. Hale were in Cara's touring car, and she was driving. The dignified doctor tried to spread himself all over the back seat; for the two girls, of course, were together in front. They were going to Cosmo Woods. Captain Quiller had not only given them full and detailed directions, but he had drawn them a map of the outlying territory.

"You could easily tell he was a sailor," commented Barbara. "Just look at the lines.

They're like the zone lines in an old geography."

It wasn't far to Cosmo Woods but it was hard to get there. After leaving the lovely ocean boulevard they took a strip of road that wound around the lake. Then, they went out on a back road that cut through a farming district. There were even some hills, uncommon for ocean territory, and when their car would reach the top of one of these there wouldn't be a mark of any kind to distinguish the end of the hill from the beginning. Such a sameness, so little variety, a few scattered houses! Assuredly the sea-shore is lovely—just at the sea's shore. But not inland.

"Let's see that chart," the doctor asked Barbara when Cara turned away from the main road onto what might charitably be called a lane. "I expect I'll need a mariner's compass, but let's take a look at it anyhow."

Babs handed over the penciled paper.

"Yes, I guess this is right," the doctor announced, after a brief survey. "But we'll probably soon have to get out and walk."

"Yes, we walk from the scrub pines," Babs said. "And see! There they are! They're the only pines around. These trees are everything else, but not pines. Why don't they call them Scrubbys?"

So presently the car had been parked in a little clearance, safely locked, and the three scouts went on.

"If we see a camp," said Cara, after they had decided that one way was a path newly trodden and the other wasn't, "perhaps Babs had better go ahead and you and I, doctor, will sort of hang behind. They may still be so afraid they might take to the trees."

"Fine idea," assented Dr. Hale, who loved the woods so thoroughly that he seemed to care as much about a clump of ferns as about finding the elusive Marcusis.

Through a little tunnel of wild-grape vines they managed to pass, while the doctor led and brushed the most impertinent brambles and vines out of the girls' way.

Then Babs grasped Cara's arm.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "There they are! Just look!"

"Oh, how funny!" Cara said excitedly. "Did you ever see anything—so funny!"

They were looking at the Italians' camp. It was made up of three old automobiles, or parts of automobiles that could never be expected to turn a wheel again. For the wheels were gone. But the tops were there and in these the little family had taken refuge. Even from the distance where the scouts had stopped little Vicky could be seen. She was swinging gaily on a swing made of rope, hanging from a sturdy tree; and a very good swing it was indeed, for any little girl to enjoy.

A woman, whom Babs recognized as Nicky's mother, was cooking something over a camp kettle. The fire was set in a stone oven and appeared mighty attractive to Dr. Hale; so he said.

"Not a bad camp at that," he remarked. "And the best thing in the world for that family. Just see how they manage. Obstacles become useful tools in their willing hands."

"Yes, look at the home-made tent built on to the side of that old car," directed Cara. "I should think it would be lovely under that."

"I wish I could see Nicky," whispered Babs a little anxiously. They were behind bushes that hid them completely from any one who might be looking out at the camp.

"There he is!" declared Cara. "Look! He's doing something with that old car, the one with wheels on."

"Yes, so he is," exclaimed Babs. "Now I'll go over and talk to him. You stay here a few minutes."

"Look out for dogs," cautioned her father. But Babs knew that the Marcusis had no dog when she went to their place over the tracks, and it wasn't likely they would have one now to attract attention to their camp in the woods.

No, they had no dogs.

CHAPTER XXV

A REVELATION

NICKY saw Babs quickly as she stepped out from the shrubbery, and he hailed her joyfully, running towards her.

"Hello, Miss Barbara!" he called gaily, which was pretty good for Nicky. He had never called her "Miss Barbara" before. "Come on over! It's all right. You can come. Cap Quiller told my folks all about you."

He was saying this as he came towards Barbara, and now he saw the doctor and Cara.

"They can come too," he said, grinning happily. "Tell them to come along."

But there was no need to do so for Cara was already hurrying up to Barbara, and the doctor was not far behind her.

"Are you sure your mother won't mind?" Babs asked, anxiously.

"Nope; she's glad. We're glad to have a doctor," said Nicky wagging his head.

"Anybody sick?" asked Dr. Hale.

"Not very. Come on. Mother sees us," said

Nicky. He was very busy with his social duties, and seemed a little excited.

But a few minutes later all three strangers were in front of the camp. The old grandmother, recognizing Barbara, was busy getting them boxes to sit on, and she appeared pleased to receive the visitors. Little Vicky instantly ran over to Cara and grabbed her hand. Perhaps she was remembering the ice-cream so bountifully served her at Cara's party.

Barbara, considering herself spokesman for the delegation, had stepped up nearer the tent, when some one crossed before the open space inside the canvas.

Her heart jumped! Who could that be? It was a man, or a big boy! Could he be Nicky's father?

The shadow appeared again, and this time it stopped directly in the center of the door way.

"Oh," gasped Babs. "I didn't know——"

But she could not utter another syllable, for there stood before her a young Italian, a young man or at least a full-grown boy. He was handsome, that should be said at once, for Barbara had instantly decided the point, and he was wearing a blouse of brillant blue, and a tam-o'-shanter hat of black velvet. So picturesque!

More important than all this, he was holding in his hand an unfinished wooden ship model!

"Oh!" gasped Babs again. "I beg your pardon."

"It is all right," replied the young man in splendid English. "We must get Nickolas to introduce us. I hope your friends will come up to our poor quarters." He put the model down carefully and looked about for Nicky.

The boy was there beside them almost instantly, and Dr. Hale with Cara had also come up to the tent.

"He's my cousin Ben," began Nicky. But his mother interrupted him.

"He is our cousin Benato," she said, "and he is an artist. You see, he was sick." She too spoke English carefully, and now as she stood beside the young man in the artist's costume it was easy to decide that he was her relation, for they looked much alike.

"Sit down, sit down," begged the polite old grandmother. She was not going to have her boxes empty when company came like that.

"And have you been ill, young man?" Dr. Hale asked, filling in a rather embarassed pause.

"Yes, Sir," replied Benato. "And I had to hide away. They told me I should be sent back to Europe if I did not get cured in six months," the artist said. "I could not get well by the railroad, but I am better since I came here. Would you tell me, Sir?" he asked, indicating he wanted to know from Dr. Hale just what his condition actually was.

It was a relief to both Babs and Cara when Benato and Dr. Hale entered the tent and left them to talk with Nicky.

"The ship model——" began Babs.

"He can make anything," the boy interrupted proudly, "and when I told him about the other, Miss Davis' you know" (he stumbled over that), "he got out his books and copied one. He is making it for you," Nicky told Barbara, just a little shyly.

"For me?" exclaimed Barbara, in surprise.

"Yes, he knows you are our friend," attested Nicky manfully.

"What did you say his name was? Isn't he perfectly stunning?" Cara coupled her questions without waiting for an answer.

"His name is Benato Sartello, but I call him Ben," said Nicky. "He was awful sick at first and used to hide away. 'Fraid they would come and take him away like they did——"

"I know," Barbara stopped him. She could never let the boy refer directly to his father in jail.

"Yes," chimed in Cara, "they do send folks back to other countries if they are not well when they come here. Dad had a wonderful chemist and he was deported."

"But Ben is like well now," declared Nicky quickly.

"He no more sick ever," added the grandmother clasping her hands prayfully. They seemed very positive that Benato was now cured.

"This camping is very healthy for you all," said Babs to Nicky's mother. She felt ill at ease among them now, as if she had penetrated their sanctuary without invitation, and so she couldn't talk naturally.

"Yes," said the mother, "the wood is good always, clean and—" she looked about her gratefully—"we could be happy here if——"

"Didn't Nicky tell you about Washington? The government, you know?" Babs asked eagerly then.

"Oh, yes. That is good," said Mrs. Marcusi. "My man did no wrong. They take him away——"

"But you'll see them bring him back again," interrupted Babs, unwilling to let even Mrs. Marcusi talk of their trouble. "You have a splendid boy in Nicky," she attested fondly.

"A very good boy. He tells me how good you are——"

"Oh, say, Mother," objected the boy. "That's no good." (He meant the compliments, of course.) "They want to know about Ben, don't you?" Nicky was wiser than he realized.

"He does such beautiful work," began Cara immediately introducing that interesting subject.

"Vera fine. He could sell many pieces but he's afraid. So Nicky take it to you," the mother explained. "When he's well he can make plenty of money." She had wonderful brown eyes like Vicky's, and her hair fell about her face as in the Madonna's pictures. Both Babs and Cara looked at her in admiration, and wondered how it was that some women were so beautifully brave.

Dr. Hale was emerging from the tent now, and his face, as well as the smile that was spread over Benato's, told the good news before a word was spoken.

"Sound as a dollar," said the doctor. "No trouble here at all." He swept his hand across the young man's chest. "And this fresh air out here is the very thing." He was talking to Mrs. Marcusi now. "This is good for all of you. Where ever did you get those?" he asked Nicky, indicating the maimed automobiles being used as the family quarters.

"We have a friend who keeps a graveyard," said the boy. "You know, they call them dead ones and they take all the good parts out. He gave us the tops and—" (he turned to Babs sharply) "that was what I had to have the five dollars for. To buy the canvas for Ben's tent. He had to have it," he insisted, apparently happy that Barbara, his friend, could understand at last about that trying complication.

"We could get you lots of orders for carved pieces," Cara told Benato, "if you could make them up." She had not addressed him directly before, and seemed a little embarassed at doing so now.

"Thank you, Miss," answered the artist. "I love to work. I came to America to work and now I shall go out, perhaps to New York." His handsome face was alight with happiness.

"Oh, no, no, no!" exclaimed both women.

"Not to New York, Benato," implored Mrs. Marcusi. "They might take you away on the ship."

"Madam," said Dr. Hale in his best professional tone, "I shall give him a certificate, a paper, you know, that will protect him from interference."

At that the older woman fell upon her knees and grasped the doctor's hand to press it to her lips.

"T'ank you! T'ank you!" she sobbed.

"Benato is vera good boy. He work hard. He must stay——"

"He will, he will," Dr. Hale checked her outburst, "and we are going to see about bringing your son back, also," he told the old mother. This occasioned another shower of kisses for the doctor's hands; and their words piled up like little firecrackers that kept popping from Italian into a kind of English, the only kind excited old Italian women could give utterance to.

Benato was talking quietly to Nicky. He had his hand affectionately upon the boy's shoulder, and he kept urging him to do something that Nicky was objecting to.

Cara and Babs were watching them while Dr. Hale was talking to the women. Finally Benato spoke.

"Did you know that Nicky can carve also?" he asked the girls, smiling broadly as he spoke to them.

"Nicky carve!" both exclaimed.

"He has talent. He helps me and he works like a man; all night if we must hurry," declared the cousin proudly. He seemed very fond of his small cousin Nicky.

"Lov-ell-ly!" breathed Cara, to whom the news brought a vision of little Nicky as an artist. Nicky, the obscure Italian boy, whom they had been talking about adopting. How absurd! And this splendid young man, Benato, was the person who had been hiding behind the poverty of the Marcusi home. And the girls talked of "black handers!"

She could not help smiling when she thought of it all. How unfair it is to judge people merely by appearances? What a bright future might be in store for these two cousins! Obscure indeed!

"And you don't need to be afraid of the health authorities," Dr. Hale told Benato, turning from his talk with the women. "They are fair, you know. They would examine you and they would find you sound. You have done wonders with your exercise and diet. Keep it up and live out here. When you do go to the city spend all the time you can in the parks," the doctor advised. "We all need the air but a boy like you *must* have it," he urged most emphatically.

"Yes sir," replied the artist deferentially. "And I thank you. We did not know how to reach a doctor until Nicky told us you were our friend. You have made us all happy," he declared, gratefully.

There was more hand-kissing from the women, and Cara whispered to Babs that they had better be going when she noticed the old grandmother mopping her brown face with her browner apron. She, Cara, didn't want both her cheeks kissed the way foreigners do it.

And now Babs was talking to Nicky. Of course she had to know about Miss Davis' model.

"You can come right along with us," she told the boy. "There's plenty of room in the car, and, Nicky, I just must tell Miss Davis as quickly as *you* tell me. She has been so good to wait, and you don't know what it has meant to her," she pointed out sensibly.

"Yes, I do," the boy declared. "But I couldn't help it. A feller's got to keep his word, ain't he?"

Babs admitted that he had, while she included in her hopes for Nicky's artistic training, some good, plain education in the simple lines of grammatical English.

Amid a perfect shower of protestations of their gratitude, the Italians finally allowed the Americans to get into their car, while Nicky went along to tell them about the lost ship model. For this was Friday, and Friday he could tell.

CHAPTER XXVI

TUMBLING IN

"YOUR sister took it," said Nicky simply, as the whole party stood in Miss Davis' parlor waiting to hear.

"My sister—took it!" Miss Isabel Davis could scarcely articulate; she was too surprised.

"Yep. She said *you* wanted to show it and *she* didn't. She said it was her's too, and she gave me five dollars not to tell." This last admission caused the boy to flush a little under his dark skin, for the taking of that "hush money" had worried Nicky considerably.

"And Miss Davis' sister knew *that* you knew where we hid it?" Babs asked in tone, but not exactly in words. "How did she know that?"

"Please sit down," begged the hostess excitedly. "I am so flustered. Sister is coming home on this train. There's the taxi——"

And it rumbled up to the door.

Just what was said after that was pretty hard to keep track of because, not only was every one talking at once but every one was so happy each just seemed to bubble up in a perfect torrent of excitement.

"It was all right, wasn't it, Sister?" the newly arrived Miss Davis, the other twin, was asking Miss Isabel Davis, "I was too proud to have our heirloom shown to a—mob," she stated. "But I was wrong. You were right," she admitted to her sister. "It would have been an honor to have had our *Santa Maria* among those other heirlooms. And there was no common crowd. I've read the papers every day and I hope we can get our ship in before it closes. I'd love to have it there."

"You can," said Dr. Hale. "I'll see about that. I'm on the final committee."

"But where did you hide it?" asked the dazed Miss Isabel, addressing her sister.

"I didn't hide it at all," the sister replied. "I put it just where it belonged, in the cabinet."

"In the cabinet!" exclaimed Babs. "And they were blaming Nicky——"

"In the cabinet!" repeated Miss Isabel, breathlessly, making straight for the tall mahogany desk that had a glass compartment at the top.

"You could have found it if you had looked, Sister," the other twin told her. "And you didn't even ask me about it."

"I didn't dare to, I was so worried." Miss

Isabel stood looking at the vague lines of the ship model behind the glass door. "Well! Well! And that was there all the time! What a foolish old woman I am!"

"But you see, Nicky was wise after all," put in Babs. "He got that precious five dollars——"

"And here's five more." Miss Isabel ran her hand in her pocket and soon held out a bill. "He deserves it. I owe it to him. Take it, son, and you're a fine little man." She couldn't just think of anything more complimentary to say, and her eyes were swimming.

Five dollars more! That meant a lot to Nicky, and he undertook to fold the precious bill so carefully that Cara wondered where he was going to put it. She watched. The others were all talking again, and Nicky noticed her interest.

"See?" he said, taking from his magic pocket, that never leaked in spite of his tatters, a carved peach pit. "I did that," he admitted shyly, opening the pit and placing the finely folded bill in the center.

"And I'm just telling sister about your sampler," piped up Miss Isabel to Babs. "And how it brought about our relationship. Isn't this too wonderful" she impulsively threw her arms around Babs, "to have cousins! We are going to be cousins——"

"Sampler cousins," joked Babs, who was almost as dazed as was Miss Isabel. But she had never for a moment lost faith in Nicky, so the establishment of his honesty did not at all surprise her. The idea of the twins stealing their own boat model! That was funny!

"And just wait until you see mine," she told the ladies. "You won't be the only ones in *our* family," she stressed the pronoun, "with a model of Columbus' ship. *Our* artists are making me one."

"And I'll have them make me the *Pinta,*" declared Cara. "You know, the companion ship to the *Santa Maria.*"

"And maybe we can complete the fleet by getting me the *Nina,*" joined in Dr. Hale, laughing heartily.

"The *Santa Maria!*" said the twins.

"The *Nina,*" said Dr. Hale.

"And the *Pinta,*" finished Cara.

"The whole float," chuckled Nicky. "Sure we can make them. Ben's good at ship models."

Cara was thrilled, she admitted.

"I never had so much fun in all my life," she told Babs, enthusiastically. "I just can't wait to see the other girls' faces when they hear. Them and their black handers," she choked, swinging around toward Nicky who was at the door.

"Here!" called out one of the twins, "you must wait for tea. It won't take a minute. Come back here, Nickolas——"

"I gotta go," sang back the boy who was waiting for nothing, neither tea, cookies, nor even an auto ride. He was flying back to camp with the five-dollar bill crammed into the peach pit.

"Talk about society," whispered Cara to Babs, as a little later they sipped their tea from the beautiful old china cups, with the deep garnet gold-rimmed bands, "this beats even a house party. Aren't the twinnies lovely?"

"But wasn't that a wonderful surprise? To find the model just where it belonged, and to think that any one could ever suspect——"

"Your Nicky," finished Cara. "That was mean. But we knew, didn't we?" she insisted loyally, glancing around her happily, for the scene with the old ladies and the doctor was what Ruth would have called "quaint."

And speaking of Ruth, it was she who led the cheering squad next day at the Community House when first prize was awarded to the Misses Davis' entry, the ship model of the famous old Columbus boat, the *Santa Maria.*

Nicky was there but no one saw him. He

was perched on the piece of lattice where the vines were so thick he had to tear them apart to peek into the room. And if he had stirred suddenly he might have spilled himself in, for the queer window was built high in the side wall of the room, and it was wide open. No one could possibly have seen Nicky—he had a grandstand seat, only he had to stand up.

It took a long time to settle all the prizes for quilts and cushions and lamp shades, and as Cara said, it was a real blessing they had not thought of nightgowns. Or maybe it was Ruth who said that, but at any rate, the girls' department had a good laugh over the idea, for such a show would indeed have been too funny for words. Imagine the big muslin high-necked, long-sleeved gowns in these days of dainty silks and cobwebby lingerie.

"There comes your sampler," Esther told Barbara, as one of the ladies stepped forward with the framed sampler in her hand.

The chairwoman, Mrs. Winters, took it and made quite a speech about its wonderful handwork. She declared it was a magnificent sample of early American needlework, and that it was well worthy of a first prize. This she then awarded the blushing Barbara, and just as Barbara turned again towards the audience a cheer, a boyish cheer, came in through the window.

"Hurrah!" shouted Nicky, and every one turned around.

The next moment a boy came tumbling down! For Nicky, in his enthusiasm had put his head in too far!

"Land sakes!"

"Mercy me!"

"What's that!"

"A boy!" came in a succession of exclamations from the astonished women. They scurried around as if a mouse had crawled into the room.

"Nicky!" screamed Barbara, "look out for Mrs. Brownell's table."

"I'm in me bare feet," answered the embarrassed boy, "an' they can't scratch."

Then Dr. Hale dragged Nicky forward—he had to drag him literally, for the boy wanted very much to escape. He told the astonished crowd something of the recent history of the Marcusi family and Nicky's brilliant prospects.

"And you know his father," Barbara reminded the speaker so that every one in the room could hear her. "The Washington authorities have promised to release Nicky's father," she managed to say. "They have found him innocent," she declared indignantly. "He never should have been—have been taken from his family," she insisted, as she always had done when jail or prison might have been the word to choose.

"Hump!" grunted Nicky, "nobody never would have knowed that if it hadn't a-been for you!"

"Nicky!" Barbara tried to hush him.

"He's right," sang out Cara's voice. "Barbara Hale has been working all summer to help this Marcusi family and we girls were so stupid we didn't even——"

"You did as much as I did," interrupted Babs, insisting upon paying the compliment to Cara, in about the way girls insist upon paying each other's carfare while the conductor waits.

But the ladies didn't wait; they clapped.

END

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